BLOODY GHOST STORIES

AN
ANTHOLOGY
OF

SHEER TERROR

BLOODY GHOST STORIES

An Anthology of Dark Stories

Edited
By

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COVER ART

"Halloween Night" by hyena reality
"Crystal Skull" by Victor Habbick

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FOREWORD

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Battlefield Suburbia

David S. Pointer

Restaurant Manager: *Have you seen Connie*
Employee: *Not in about 10 minutes*

There's a ghost coming up out of that Civil War surgery amputation kit-see the thin smoke coming off the wooden case. There is cryptic creamy yellow ooze suitable for postoperative eating by the blue bottle flies, or errant surgical staff flicking. There's a surgeon waiting for the surgery kit that until recently only had a hernia knife to operate with, but somehow managed to saw off all the badly injured extremities anyway. Then later he let the young lieutenant borrow it to carve up his lunch-hasty sleeve wipes serving as a thorough cleaning, of course. In addition, there's a film projector or recorder in the unspecified distant future or past— making this seem surreal for some audience-maybe a medical classroom or a garage somewhere in the darkness of Iowa.

Maybe a homeowner experimenting with a gridiron or Pfannansteil (C-section) incisions creating more complications, slower healing, a marathon of future scarring, and a great scare factor for a tiny waitress pulled from the walls of frozen storage as a customer waited patiently for his sausage, and eggs. In addition, did I mention a bone file furious with everybody bleeding into both historical periods -keeping away the flies or letting the waitress know that there will be nothing flaccid on the agenda around here?

Grinding and grinding and grinding waiting for her putrid bowel pathology to pour forth a confession onto the cleanest floor the world has ever seen-shining like Union glory.

The surgeon knows this isn't his Civil War, but keeps on serving the boys reaching for a suture needle to wire- noticing the newly delivered surgery kit. Delivered? But from where and from whom? There's another terrible explosion, and the ghost sees the medical doctor disappear into every possible direction. Patients are screaming for immediate service, either or their mothers' or maybe all three if speech hasn't been disabled by pain or perimeter fire.

The waitress, Connie is screaming too. Her friends said she had a sweet disposition and was loved by everybody, but her amateur fillet master, of course. He's getting frustrated because he can't find her possession center-the place where her demons live. Therefore, he is filing down hard now with the old fury not backed by a morphine servicing like the troops might be treated to before the terrible explosion. Now, with the field surgeon gone along with the aforementioned hernia knife also blown into indescribable bits of metal shrapnel soon missing in action or into any available skin.

Fifteen feet away, the ghost hovers over the burning surgeons' tent taking it all in. And now he must offer his services in silence to those wounded soldiers still alive on the field.

What is his skill level? Does it match or exceed our previous surgeon's expertise, or is it comparable or below our experimental amateur in the Iowa garage-giving as good as he ever got in his familial home?

There is a new case of Union soldier gangrene arriving on the saturated medical cot coming down onto a wobbly wooden cutting table. And it's plain to see that the ghost is approximating something like a mid-sternal incision making use of most of his medical tools. The supplies are inadequate in quantity but not quality. All are being used in correct fashion as he lops off fingers and toes before cauterizing the wounds with a branding iron.

Maybe in life, the ghost was a field trained war surgeon-not a privileged product of an Eastern medical school, but a foot soldier borne of the blue invested boot deep in mass casualty blood. Offering so much more than our garage mechanic going clinically berserk as a light bulb hanging on a red cord bobs hard just behind the action— making new mechanized cuts with grey scary things, a few more swift swipes, and a poet's final streak of motorized silver into her gushing insanity and horrid screams. And somehow the ghost

Emerges into the garage, and goes suturing up the insanity ether and all.

Restaurant Manager: *Did you hear about Connie?*

Employee: *No*

Restaurant Manager: *Oh my goodness-Let me tell you about it.*

About the Author:

David S. Pointer is a new short story writer. He currently lives in Murfreesboro, TN.

Helping Out Away From Home

David S Pointer

Bob Simmons had killed enough pistoleros to fill up a pulp novel-the kind of book that had become so popular back in the East. Now, Bob found himself in the local jail having gone behind the bar at Riley's saloon-reaching into the owner's own supply of Puritan Rye. Bob had managed to beat back the tenderfoot bartender while finishing off the top-shelf alcohol without permission or proper compensation.

When Bob woke up, he was in jail where he found Sheriff Perkins not to his liking. The Sheriff kept adding charges, fines, and making legal threats. Boy, you're going up to see that judge soon-you better not disturb the peace in my jail anymore. This was the kind of thing Bob had to put up with when he asked for water or to use the outhouse.

The next day, when the sheriff decided to take Bob outback for a bathroom call and a sidewinder beating, Bob whacked him hard with a penitentiary paperweight gripped impulsively off the lawman's desk. Then, Bob gathered up his gun, holster, hideaway pistol, and secured an involuntary cash contribution from the unconscious sheriff to help ease the hot, dusty, ride ahead. And it was a real shame, that the sheriff didn't stock any of that Puritan Rye, because bob would have borrowed that bottle too.

Bob didn't know it yet, but his body was about to be borrowed-just like that bottle of Puritan Rye had been. It wasn't so much Bob's body that the ghost needed to borrow as it was his trigger finger and fine shooting ability. Bob had also been utilized as a confederate sniper during the Civil War, and could conduct business with a long gun too. His field craft was indeed ghost like, and had impressed a lot of the high brass ten years earlier.

The ghost, had been a teenage boy living on his mother's ranch over in Santa Ria. She had been refusing to sell the property that she had inherited from her parents-long since passed in a buckboard accident on the way home with a load of dry goods that would eventually end up being sold to the Comancheros by passerby scavengers.

The boy before the ghost had been named John. He had been killed while helping his mother. John had been reaching for a powder horn to help reload one of his mom's old rifles when struck by a ricocheting bullet fired

by hired guns-probably from the Morgan's spread. But that was yet to be determined. Other folks were interested in the property too. Eventually there would probably be a railroad nearby and a new mine, but Johan and his mother knew none of this. They had known only that others were pressing them to sell-followed by a fatal night of gunfire that left John dead.

The town undertaker had been a lifelong friend of John's grandfather, and had insisted on a first rate burial for the boy at no cost to John's mother, Emma Forester. John was not sure that he was a ghost for a long time, however, after he was sure-he was also certain that he had to help his mother remain safe in her own place in the family ranch…

For some unexplained reason, Bob halted his 16-hand high horse, and then eased back on the reigns turning the horse around. Bob started riding West at a fair-paced overland gallop.

At the next town, Bob stopped for supplies. He inexplicably filled an unused tobacco tin with store-bought candy. He had used this tobacco tin during the War Between the States to keep various items dry. He did not smoke, but had retained the tin in case he ever needed it again. Then he stopped in at Widow Parker's boarding house for a nice breakfast. He usually liked bacon and hard tack, but today he ordered pancakes instead.

Beyond that, he walked around the town buying a used Ranger star Concho from a blacksmith, before returning to the local general store to partially fill an empty hunting bag with more hard candy and a roped bundle of black licorice. Normally, Bob introduced himself to the local saloon girls- asking if they would like to be waltzed around the piano floor in smooth measured steps leading to the stars, Today, Bob just went back to the livery stable barn and ate his candy.

The next morning, Bob brushed off the straw, and rode for the Morgan place. Jeb Morgan was tending a fence, and saw Bob first. "What's your business, Mister?"

"Well, I've come here to kill you, if you be the folks that killed me," said Bob sheepishly.

Jeb Morgan looked like he had seen a ghost "What in the hell are you talking about, and what's your handle, hombre?" roared Jeb. I am known as Bob, but you might have known me as John Forester? Jeb looked mortified, and in disbelief as he went for his stag-handled gun-Bob's bullet tore through Jeb's chest and he fell to the unfinished fence draped over it like a big blanket. Bob turned his horse and headed for their main house.

Oscar Morgan had heard the gunfire, and came out of his doorway—scatter gun at the ready. Bob shot as the scattergun swung around to down him with a hole. Oscar hit his front porch hard and never moved again as the blood washed out from under him onto a few tall flowers.

Bob dismounted his horse, and bolted boyishly up the porch steps into the parlor where the old man was loading his pistol. Bob popped a piece of candy into his mouth while simultaneously pulling the trigger. Old Steve Morgan took one in the forehead then staggered forward about three steps crashing into a display case of custom smoking pipes before falling so forward into hell.

Bob tore out fast and hopped back onto Razor, the horse. Finally, he headed for the bunkhouse. He reached into his saddlebag for a stick of dynamite, and fumbled for his match case in his shirt pocket. The bunkhouse boys were all professionals filing out fast and Bob lobbed the dynamite into their dreams of more glorious gunplay. The immediate explosion also ended the dream of misappropriating any of Mrs. Forester's ranch and surrounding property as Bob visited each downed body, body part and called it good.

John knew he had to turn Bob's body loose, but the Morgan's wagon wheel tree swing was the best he'd ever elevated towards the sky on, and he was certain that Bob didn't really mind. About fourteen minutes later he said goodbye to Bob and thanked him proper-by paying in full with the lion's share of that black licorice. John's vapor departed in a high velocity vamoose towards his mother's house, and Bob had a powerful hankerin' for back bar Puritan Rye.

About the Author:

David S. Pointer was the son of a piano playing bank robber who died when David was 3 years old. David later served in the Marine military police. He grew up in the historic Outlaw country Missouri-land of Frank and Jesse James. Later he was instructed in archery by the Albert James family. The James' sere from the same family tree as the notorious outlaws. The James children all won multiple state archery championships held at the state fairgrounds in Sedalia, Missouri.

Losing Control

William Todd Rose

The first warning in the handbook states, in no uncertain terms, that there's some malevolent shit out there. This isn't a job for the timid or weak. To work in this profession, a man needs to be carved out of stone; he has to continually face his own mortality and somehow not go insane when out there in the cut scenes. That is what we call The Divide, see. Cut scenes. It's like that moment in movies where Act One and Act Two briefly coexist. They touch one another and melt into a composite for a second before one asserts its dominion over the other. The same thing happens with what we tend to think of as Life and Death. There are borderlands, like little pockets of stasis dimpling the surface of eternity; most departing souls pass over them so effortlessly they don't even notice their existence. But some specifically look for these warrens. They refuse to let go of the physical and hang on with everything they've got, sometimes creating their own cut scenes where previously there were none. Others simply become trapped.

For reasons we haven't quite figured out, the majority of these snared spirits come to inhabit the bodies of moths. Johnson, the head of Theoretical Positioning, told me once that he suspected these creatures have the ability to flutter through both dimensions simultaneously. He compared them to bees in a field, picking up pollen along the way, but openly admitted the math to prove his hypothesis dangles maddeningly out of reach. Jewell, who should have been a poet instead of his assistant, insists this is why moths continually bat themselves against bulbs: the quantum hitchhikers know their paths have diverted and try, time and time again, to cross into The Light.

The handbook warns against this as well. We're not supposed to attach any emotion to the things we see and do. We are supposed to balance the stoicism of a scientist with the resolve of a soldier. Romantic notions such as Jewell's were bad enough in the labs, but they could get your ass in serious trouble out in the field. The slightest hint of emotion is like striking a match in the darkness: all things previously hidden are brought to light. With a mind of pure reason, you can see them. However, with the passions of the living, they can see you as well.

Which is where I come in. My official title is Recon and Enforcement Technician, Level II. When wooing young recruits, the Agency makes it sound like you'll be some sort of cosmic cop, patrolling the beat and extending mankind's reach over the kingdom of the dead. After six months of mentoring, when you are deemed ready to solo, you discover the truth. You're basically a glorified janitor, sweeping cobwebs from the corners of infinity. That's why, despite the handbook's recommendations to the contrary, we refer to ourselves internally as Whisks.

As such, life becomes routine. I wake up at six AM, have coffee and buttered toast over the morning news. I catch an unscheduled subway at an abandoned station whose lock is shiny and new, perfectly matching the key I wear around my neck.

My office is fifteen stories underground and is the nest in a tangle of wires that siphon energy from structures above. It's a vast network of relays, switches, and humming transformers that most eyes never see. We take just enough power from each home and business that the owners never notice. Distributed between hundreds of thousands of buildings, we steal enough electricity to power a small town without so much as a bill.

The handbook highly recommends keeping a journal such as this, but it also warns against mentioning specific cities. I could be in San Francisco or New York. Paris or Moscow. Like those I hunt, I exist nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. So instead, I'll describe my office.

It's a fairly small room with cameras perched in each corner. The walls are painted in soothing pastels and water gurgles over a stone fountain in the corner. I have potted plants that I never water, their needs tended by Maintenance, and instead of a desk, I have a long, plush couch. Behind the couch are monitors and leads, all the equipment which tracks my vitals when I'm in the cut scenes. Moreover, across the room is my so-called partner.

I have been working with him for nearly a year now and have never known his name. His body is frail and shriveled and the hum of the respirator keeping him alive is a rhythmic constant. An IV drips nutrients into his withered arm and he never awakens from his induced coma. Being under isn't like sleeping, you see. There are no dreams, no REM, none of the brainwaves you would normally see in a functioning human being.

Anesthesia is the little death people plunge into daily without realizing what lurks within those murky depths.

This much about my partner I know. He was terminally ill. They all are, when first approached. With medical bills piling up, the scouts paint a picture of financial ruin for those left behind. Wives, husbands, and children: in addition to grief, they'll need to deal with the strain of treatments insurance stopped covering long ago. Staying alive is akin to selfishness; but it can all go away with the signing of a simple contract. One signature and the patient "dies" in the night. He is whisked away to one of our labs and grieving loved ones are surprised in days to come with a settlement from a life insurance policy they did not know had been taken out. A very sizable payout that ensures their continued comfort as they come to terms with grief.

These Sleepers, as we call them, are the most important part of our operation. Their bodies, when tuned to the proper frequencies, act as conduits. Their dry lips move so slightly that it almost looks like a trick of the light. The thin wheeze from their throats could pass for the body desperately trying to breathe on its own; but in reality, the voices of the dead speak through them. Once, these people had loved and laughed and lived; but now, so close to the end, they have been reduced to nothing more than eavesdropping devices and the snippets of conversation they capture are dutifully recorded.

Position can be triangulated by the strength of their voices. The more clear and distinct the words, the closer the cut scene is to physical space. Algorithms I don't fully understand calculate a coordinate from this data and cross-reference it with heart rate and brain activity. This, in turn, creates what is a pushpin in the topography of Space-Time. That pushpin is both my focus and destination.

As a Whisk, I've been trained in the art of meditation, among other things. I am not the fastest by far, but I can still guide myself to Theta in the same amount of time it takes most people to mumble their bedtime prayers. Once at that level, visualizing the golden cord is a snap. I let it out like a guide rope tied to my mortal body. A little at a time, taking tentative steps into the unknown. Layman call this astral projection; but to a Whisk, it's simply The Walk.

My Walks correspond with the messages my partner broadcasts and most are simply routine assignments. These are the spirits who long to

cross The Divide. They sense the mystery and know the trappings of the flesh are no longer a concern. They have just become sidetracked on their journey and need a little help.

But, occasionally, things can go very wrong.

***

The day Albert Lewis was executed, my Sleeper screamed. His vocal chords rattled as neck muscles bulged and his body arched off the bed while his hands reflexively clenched. Beads of sweat dotted his brow and for the briefest of seconds, I thought I heard the sizzle of electricity and caught a whiff of singed flesh. His instrumentation went haywire, spiking like a seismograph placed on the epicenter of a major fault as his face screwed into a grimace of clenched teeth and spasming muscle. To the untrained eye, it would have looked as if he were in the throes of an agony so intense that Death would seem a welcome friend. But I reminded myself that it was just involuntary contractions, no different than making a dead frog twitch its leg with the application of current. I remained professional and detached, just as the handbook says I should.

Two weeks later, the other screams began. A dozen voices moaned through a single mouth, alternately pleading for help and yelling wordlessly. I could feel their pain and fear as clearly as the clothes on my back, which suddenly felt too tight and constrictive. Loosening my tie, I leaned over my sleeper's writhing body and peered at his charts before turning to stare into one of the cameras.

I knew what this was. I'd read about it in case studies, but never actually witnessed the phenomena. I felt like a child who had begun doubting the reality of Santa Claus only to awaken that night to a jolly fat man in red.

The handbook calls it a Vertices Collision Scenario; but to us, it meant bad news.

"Chuck, it's nearly 3:30. Jarvis left an hour ago. Rollins hasn't come in yet." The female voice came from a speaker embedded into the ceiling. The familiar lilt I'd come to know so well sounded strained and I imagined stress creasing a face I'd only imagined.

"Alone, at last." My attempt at humor was flat and emotionless and the woman I had only ever known as Control let it hang in the air. In

perfect silence, I looked up at the camera as I ran my fingers through my hair, weighing the consequences of the situation.

According to the handbook, it shouldn't have been a decision at all. Protocol dictates that the data be handed off to a Level I Whisk, someone with more experience in the field. Someone who'd passed the exams instead of continually screwing up the translocation equation.

"So what's it going to be, Chuck?" Control's husky voice always called to mind a film noir heroine; I pictured her within her booth, masked by shadow as red lips moved just above the microphone.

I would get my ass chewed and a mark in my file at worst. A promotion, if I played my cards right. What can I say? I was ambitious and, at the time, it seemed like that damn equation would never give up her secrets. If I had any hope of making it to Level I, it would require a bold and decisive move in place of the exams. An executive decision that would make my career.

"I got this, Control." I was so naïve in my confidence that I actually believed it.

What I've never understood is why Control gave me that option. She knew the handbook as well as I. As part of her duties, she was required to safeguard my well-being. And perhaps that's what it was. Maybe some sort of bond had formed over the years; maybe she realized my eagerness, my drive to rise to the top, and didn't want to disappoint me. Or maybe she was just bored.

Whatever her reasons, Control let me walk over to my couch with its assortment of tasseled pillows. She allowed me to slip the Halo onto my head, an insanely expensive piece of equipment that looks like a hard hat's webbing. She let me close my eyes and open my chakras as I slipped from this body like a balloon from the grasping hand of a child.

She should have stopped me, damn it.

She should have stopped me.

***

Here's the thing about cut scenes. More often than not, they are simply void space. Unless you have actually stood in the heart of a singularity, you cannot possibly understand the true meaning of desolation. In a place where the laws of physics no longer hold sway, your golden cord is your

lifeline. You know it connects you to another place, a place of things and events, and if not for it, you'd never find your way home. Drifting through dead space for all eternity, neither alive nor dead but subsisting somewhere between. That, my friend, is my personal definition of hell; and it is precisely what Albert Lewis strove to create.

Albert Lewis, as we all know, was an evil man. He existed at a crossroads between sadism and black magic, choosing to torture his victims for weeks on end before performing the final rite. Their suffering, he claimed, was like energy flowing into a battery. With every puncture, burn, and scream, he grew stronger. The field behind his farmhouse was a garden of corpses, each one dropped into a shallow furrow sprinkled with lime. Severed hands sat upon his mantle, clutching various ceremonial objects in their withered fingers: a dagger, a bell, the mummified heart of his mother. They say he'd painted murals of blood upon his walls, tortured landscapes of such detail that museums would have displayed them if done in any other medium.

When a person as willful as Albert Lewis gets their hooks in a cut scene, they refuse to let go. Instead of being an empty pocket of nothingness, they exert their determination and create personal realities. The more convincing the cut scene becomes, the wider it expands. Textures, smells, and tastes take hold and the illusion of time reasserts itself. If left to its own devices, it can eventually become an entire world with thriving ecosystems and complex weather patterns.

My job, in a nutshell, it to keep this from happening. We try to clean up these transient dimensions before they become too real and the megalomaniac at their core is convinced of his own divinity. If allowed to grow indefinitely, a cut scene will also draw other souls like filings to a magnet. Maybe they're fooled into thinking it's the promised land. Or maybe its governed by the laws of attraction. The point is, once others believe in the reality of this custom cut scene, they're stuck there as well. Like flies in a web. And that convergence constitutes a Vertices Collision Scenario.

Albert Lewis had created a world of darkness. Storm clouds flickered with lightning and the land below was a scorched landscape of cinders and ash. A hot breeze carried the scent of carrion on its wake and left an oily patina on what I thought of as my skin; my golden cord streamed from my belly button and trailed off into a blank horizon.

I stared into that black, empty space and closed my eyes. When opened again, my cord snaked like a phantom through stone walls. The blocks glistened wetly by torchlight and condensation dripped from beams overhead, plinking into puddles on the brick floor.

I seemed to be standing in the curved stairwell of a medieval turret. Windows shaped like tombstones lined the wall, the stone frames surrounding them slick with algae as lightning bathed the structure in electric blue. Flames sputtered in the wind and drops of molten tar hissed from the orange glow of the torches. From somewhere up ahead, a woman wailed. Her sobs sounded as if they came from the far end of a long tunnel and I glanced back at my cord again, searching for reassurance in its presence.

"Remember the feel of warm sand against bare feet. Your 10th birthday, surprised with a trip to the beach. The smell of saltwater and gulls squawking overhead." It was Control's voice, seeming to radiate from somewhere within my mind. "Remember cutting your heel on broken glass, how the wound stung as your blood dripped onto wet sand."

She was good. With nothing more than my vitals to guide her, Control skillfully reinforced my bonds with reality, summoning memories from the physical details notated in my file. Her ability to capture emotion, to build a sense of time and place, was just as important as the golden cord. Without that, my cord would fade. Without her, I'd be lost.

Instead of succumbing to this false world, I turned and faced the spiraling, stone stairs. I heard other voices now, as well, lending their distress to a symphony of suffering. Whimpers, weak pleas for help and mercy, hysterical crying, and strained, warbling wails: their pain and fear swirled around me like an invisible demon. It raked the back of my neck with cold talons and chased chills down the length of my spine. It coiled around my throat like a tightening constrictor and plucked at my golden cord as if testing its resolve and durability.

Part of me didn't want to ascend those stairs. In the pools of shadow, I sensed danger, as if some lurking creature followed my every move. My feet had become leaden weights and I channeled every all my willpower to muster the strength required for that next step.

"Remember your training." Control again, establishing a link to a world of sunshine and flowers, of fresh spring breezes and laughter. "It's only as real as you make it, Chuck."

Another step and the keening of tortured souls grew louder. My palms felt as moist and cold as the stone walls surrounding me. My instincts screamed to go back, to follow my cord home and turn this assignment over to a Level I Whisk.

"Chuck…"

A spasm tremored my thigh, making the muscle twitch and jerk, and yet I still placed my foot upon that next stair. Ignoring fluttering wings of panic in my stomach, I focused on the next bend, the next flickering torch.

"Chuck, you have to keep that emotion in check. For God's sake, don't expose yourself. Commence Kundalini Breathing in three… two… one…"

Drawing a deep breath through my nose was like snorting a line of decayed flesh. The stench watered my eyes and infected my sinuses, seeping into my saliva glands and flooding my mouth with the sickeningly sweet taste of rotten meat. My diaphragm hitched in protest, expelling the tainted oxygen through choked gags that left my trachea feeling as if I'd belched fire.

"That's it. I'm pulling you out." Control's words were a panicked babble, shouted so loudly into her microphone that they crackled and popped with static.

"Negative, Control. I've got it covered. Mission proceeding." I tried to sound confident and relaxed, but even my own ears couldn't ignore the tremble in my voice.

The top of the stairs loomed closer and it sounded as if Hell existed right around the bend. So many voices calling out, such much prolonged agony erupting from their souls; for a moment, my head swam with the combined force of their anguish and I steadied myself against the wall. The rough-hewn stone seemed to sigh at my touch and the torches wavered as if their flames danced with a gust of air.

Snatching my hand away, I waited for a reply from Control. But only the cries of the damned answered me. I pictured her dashing from her console room, fumbling with the convoluted override codes that would grant access to my office, and finally letting me see what she really looked like.

The problem is the passage of Time is a human perception. It would take Control three minutes to open that door and remove the Halo. Two if she were half as good as I suspected. But that seemingly short period can

translate into days within a cut scene. Each construct has its own rules governing existence. Time, like matter, becomes putty to be molded and shaped at will. Help was two minutes away; help would not come for millennia: in The Divide, there's no difference.

My golden cord fluctuated like a fluorescent bulb on the verge of burning out. One moment solid, the next hazy and indistinct. I knew this meant my perceptions were taking hold, that this tower was integrating into my existence paradigm with each frantic beat of my heart.

The handbook says in a worst case scenario, Whisks can implement an escape technique we call Crashing. I've never had to actually utilize it in the field, but mastering it is required to pass the Level III exams. An abrupt change of focus, like shifting a speeding car suddenly into reverse, and your body falls. All the different dimensions making up our universe become like intricately detailed stained glass windows stacked upon one another. Shattering one after another, the Whisk crashes through reality until hitting his own physical body with a jolt.

I knew I could Crash. I knew I could escape from that hellish tower and the nightmares that awaited, so close now that the stench seemed to emanate from the very molecules of the air itself.

I knew I could be free.

And yet, I chose to trudge on.

***

The chamber was as large as a football field and bordered on all sides by the same stone that comprised the stairwell. Moldy banners hung from the walls with scenes of torture fading into moth-eaten fabric. The glow of torches imbued the crude drawings with lives of their own, creating the illusion of movement in dancing patterns of light and shadow.

There were no windows in this room, nothing to convey that anything existed other than the high ceiling and impenetrable stone. Every few yards a column descended from the gloom overhead and planted itself firmly into the floor. As large as elevator shafts, they lined either side and the cobbled floor became a network of paths leading to each one. Grating covered the gaps between the paths and wisps of smoke curled above the blackened steel, born of the fires raging miles below.

Here, the sounds of agony were deafening and pierced my eardrums like sonic needles. Screams so harsh and shrill that they seemed to vibrate my skull with resonance were punctuated by gasps of pain. Blubbering sobs mingled with animalistic howls and from the far end of the room a man with a child-like voice repeatedly shrieked the word No like a protective mantra.

Underscoring the cacophony was a steady rhythm of clinks and clanks as the tortured fought against their restraints. The iron chains struck the stone columns as manacles scraped away skin, turning wrists into bands of glistening, red tissue peppered with frayed strands of muscle and nerve. The captives hung off so close to the floor that those with the energy stood on tiptoe in defiance of their trembling legs; others, too weak to fight, dangled like limp dolls. With bent knees and bowed heads, they slumped forward. Their body weight supported entirely by the chains, they swung slightly and gasped for breath.

Walking the central path was like strolling through Satan's personal museum. A stringy-haired woman drooped in one display and her torso had been sliced with surgical precision. Peeled open and pinned to her back, the parted slabs of flesh revealed organs that squished and pulsed as she shifted positions. In another tableau, a rat perched upon the shoulder of a doughy, overweight man and cleaned droplets of blood from wiry whiskers with swipes of its paws before darting in for another bite. Sinking teeth into lips, it pulled away strands of gristle that stretched like rubber before snapping free with savage shakes of its head.

I witnessed things in that chamber no man should ever see. I cringed as roaches scurried from beneath flaps of skin sliced into the body of a tribal warrior. My eyes teared as I passed a woman with an angelic face who was more skeleton than skin; sloughing off her own flesh, the sagging folds held to her frame by hooks and thin twine.

And yet, I persisted.

From the shadows, I a golden throne emerged. Comprised of guilded skulls, femurs, and tibia, it sat upon a riser of writhing people whose distended and mottled skin had been stitched together with silver thread. A tangle of arms, legs, and torsos: it was impossible to tell where one body stopped and another began. They moved as an uncoordinated unit, some scrambling for purchase and slipping in blood, crawling ever forward like a human rickshaw. With bent backs and scraped knees, they carried the

throne on an undulating wave of flesh and their suffering rang through the air like fanfare heralding the arrival of dark royalty.

Seated upon this throne, Albert Lewis stared down with watery, blue eyes. His white hair was a disheveled mop of tufts sprouting from a face that looked as if it were carved from stone. With wrinkles chiseled into alabaster features, he pulled his lips into a thin, tight smile devoid of mirth or warmth.

"What have we here?" The voice boomed from the old man's body as loud as thunder and fresh gales of pain echoed from the prisoners as its vibrations flicked exposed nerve endings. "Have you come to grovel before my Mercy Seat, boy? Have you traveled all this way to present yourself as an offering?"

My golden cord was nothing more than a shadow by now, as thin and tenuous as a mortal's grasp on life. Knowing that answering would only mire me more deeply into his depraved realm, I focused on my hands as I'd been taught, willing them to be bathed in the white light that is my stock and trade.

"Perhaps you'd like to play with my pet, then."

As if in response to a command, a thing which was only remotely human scuttled from the darkness. The base of his living litter had been constructed with coarse fibers pulled so tightly that the skin dimpled around each stitch, but this creature had not been so "fortunate".

The base of its collective body was formed by two burly men on hands and knees with their asses facing one another. Their buttocks had been splayed extensively and then pressed against each other, conceivably bandaged, and allowed to heal into a single graft. Conjoined to them by the same technique was the body of a petite woman. Her legs were extended like a gymnast caught mid-split and the scarring that melded her thighs and calves to the men was like a jagged pink seam. With wrists severed, her hands had been replaced by curved blades whose barbs gleamed in the torchlight like the teeth of a predator. Her face was a contorted mask of insanity, lips pulled back into a snarl, revealing a web-work of needles attached like braces to her teeth.

"This is my domain!" Lewis yelled as he leaned forward. "You think you can waltz in here with your little bag of tricks and usurp my sovereignty?"

His creature scurried forward, surprisingly quick and spider-like. The woman's hair was plastered to her skull with sweat and her face burned hotly from an infection which made her veins look like roots spreading through reddened cheeks. She hissed as her blades whooshed through the air and I stumbled backward, my hands flailing for the reassurance of my golden cord.

At that moment, I knew all hope was lost. I felt it evaporate within me like a deflating balloon; everything that had ever been good or wholesome was purged from my body with a gasp as my fingers clawed at nothing. No cord. No way home.

Albert Lewis' laughter echoed off the walls and ceiling, the reverberations seeming to grow in strength and volume as if his guffaws fed off one another like parasitic organisms. The mouths of his victims opened in unison, but instead of spilling more screams and wails, they resounded with the deep baritone of cruel laughter.

My hands tingled as if they coursed with the white light I tried to summon as I backed away from the clattering monster. I tried to narrow my focus, to envision the glow radiating out from them. One concentrated, well-placed blast of healing energy: that's all I was asking for. But was the numbness due to arcane forces gathering within? Or simply hyperventilation from quick gasps of putrid air?

"Welcome," Lewis sneered, "to my reign."

I don't know why, but at that moment a memory sprang to mind. I saw my grandfather on the sun dappled bank of a stream; squatting beside me, he pointed at the gurgling water and mouthed words I was too young to remember. But that was all it took.

I didn't need to see my golden cord to know it had returned. I felt it tethered to me like a weight that had previously been missing, anchoring me to my distant body and the world my grandfather had lived in. At the same time, my hands were engulfed in auras of dazzling light. Like the white hot centers of a twin explosions, rays burst from central points in my palms and streamed out, dissolving swaths of this false reality in their wake.

The beams of light spun around Albert Lewis like strands of a cocoon, wrapping his body in their brilliance as stone walls quaked and crumbled. I heard his scream, a yell of unadulterated anger amid the rumble of his construct falling away into the void. The monster he'd

created stumbled as if the floor had just been pulled out from under and its individual heads glared at their insane creator.

"Die! Die! Die!" They chanted in unison and within seconds the call was picked up by every desiccated soul within the chamber. Some gurgled through a froth of blood, others wheezed from gill-like slits carved into necks, but one voice blared louder than the others; only the raw tightness of my vocal chords clued me into the fact that the voice was my own. "Die! Die! Die!"

Defiant to the end, Albert Lewis fought back. I felt his darkness seep into my beams of light like an oil slick polluting a river. It reached out with malicious tendrils, attempting to trace the energy back to the source as if following its own golden cord.

A tsunami of images crashed over my consciousness. I saw the people he'd chained in his cellar, heard their whimpered pleas as they begged for mercy. I felt organs beneath my fingers, like slippery pouches of warm velvet, tasted the salty tang of blood, and swelled with a god-like sense of dominion. I looked through his eyes, relived his memories, and felt what he had felt.

"Damn it, Chuck!" Control's voice severed the bond as cleanly as a cleaver and the entire cut scene exploded in a burst so brilliant it could have been the birth of a star.

When the glare faded, I found myself in the arms of a woman with auburn hair. My cheek still stung from her slaps but she cradled my head in her arms as tears streamed from eyes that sparkled like perfectly cut sapphires. The stench of decay was replaced by a slightly floral perfume and she placed a soft, warm hand against my face.

"Don't you ever pull anything like that again. Do you hear me? Ever."

And there, in my little office far underground, Control held me and allowed her purple blouse to absorb my tears.

***

The first warning in the handbook states, in no uncertain terms, that there's some malevolent shit out there. What it doesn't tell you is sometimes it follows you back. Like the hitchhiking souls in Jewell's moth theory, it tags along for the ride, returning to the world from which it came.

I feel him in me, lurking in the depths of my subconscious, and wonder how pretty Control's head would be if it were missing an eye or two. I imagine her chained in my basement, how vibrant and red the blood would be against her smooth, pale skin… her voice screaming a hymn to the glory of my will…

I fight it with meditation. I fight it with prayer and a hundred little kindness bestowed upon strangers.

I fight it.

But it's getting harder.

Last night, having pulled the information from her file, I found myself on the sidewalk outside Control's apartment. I watched her silhouette undress through a lit window and stroked the cool blade of the knife through my pocket.

It won't be much longer now. I'm as sure of this as I am powerless to stop it. She would be so lovely turned inside out, with her viscera quivering like a frightened pet.

No, not much longer; I feel myself slipping away and know it's only a matter of time before I lose control….

About the Author:

Named by The Google+ Insider's Guide as one of their top 32 authors to follow, **William Todd Rose** writes speculative fiction that lends itself to the dark, and often surreal, realm of the macabre. To date, his full length works include *Shadow of the Woodpile*, *Cry Havoc*, *Sex in the Time of Zombies, Shut the Fuck Up and Die!, Apocalyptic Organ Grinder,* and *The Dead and Dying*. In the coming months, a revised and expanded second edition of *The Seven Habits of Highly Infective People* will be released by Permuted Press. For more information, including links to free fiction, please visit the author online at www.williamtoddrose.com.

Winner Takes All

Dorothy Davies

It started when Wayne (I've blanked out his somewhat rude nickname) Johnson walked into the Pig and Bucket at 7 o'clock on the last day of the month. What month doesn't matter, the fact it was the last day does.

It's been a tradition at the Pig and Bucket for as long as anyone could remember that whoever walked in at that time bought drinks for everyone there. Just the once, mind, one round of drinks.

It's been going on so long no one gave it a thought. Like, no one stood around and waited until 7 o'clock had gone, either. If they were there and wanted a drink, they walked in and paid up. It was something we did.

The thing was … this night, the one when it all kicked off, someone else walked in alongside Wayne. A stranger.

Everyone in the bar went silent like a switch had been turned off. Flick. Chatter stopped, glasses no longer clinked, feet did not shuffle on the sawdust.

Every head turned toward the door.

He was tall, the stranger; dark but not in the way you think, not like a dark man coming in but a man bringing in darkness. Oh, that sounds stupid but you know what I mean: if you've ever met someone that seems like they came from 'down there' rather than 'up there', you'll know just what I mean. I can't put it in proper words like those writer people can.

The doors on the Pig and Bucket open wide, so they do, it's possible for two people to walk in at the same time. The question – silently mouthed by every last drinker in the pub – was, which of them came in first? If it were the stranger, then we had a problem, 'cos trying to explain our weird tradition to them who don't know is pretty damn difficult.

Wayne turned to the dark man and said; "whoever walks in here at 7 on the last day of the month gets to buy everyone a drink, friend."

And the dark man said, "I am not your friend and you were a fraction ahead of me, sir."

Well now, I can't be remembering the last time anyone said 'sir' to Wayne, he being the biggest loser I know but still…it was polite, if nothing else. Wayne looked round for support but for once none of us had been

watching the clock to see if anyone would come in at 7, so it was his word against the dark man. I wouldn't have put a bet on which one was right and I definitely wouldn't have argued with someone who looked like he came from somewhere not very nice, either.

But I'm not Wayne Johnson.

The talk started up again, low, almost self-conscious, drinks were being drunk and feet began to kick the sawdust into piles again. Everyone tried to act as if they weren't the least bit interested but they were; they all wanted that free drink off one or other of them. If the dark man played the game, of course.

"I walked in afore you." Wayne frowned at the stranger.

"Sir," he was nothing if not polite, "I walked in beside you. We entered the door at the same time. Now, should we not buy these gentlemen their drinks between us?"

"No."

The tone in Wayne's voice made the landlord, Chev, look up pretty darn quick, I can tell you. It meant *trouble* in the worst way. Wayne was an all right guy, even drunk he was an all right guy but get him on the wrong side no matter when and you had a handful of aggro any sane person would avoid.

The stranger wouldn't know that.

Chev leaned on the bar and looked at them both.

"Might I make a suggestion, you two?"

Wayne looked at him. "What?"

"Wayne, yo-" he stopped himself from using Wayne's nickname just in time. "Listen up. You two got a dispute here. Now either one of you leaves and the other one buys the drinks or you gamble for it. Toss a coin, perhaps?"

"Nah." Wayne dismissed both suggestions without even looking round at the stranger. I watched him, not Wayne and noticed his face didn't change.

"What would you suggest, sir?"

"Cards. Play you at cards. You do play, don'tcha?"

"I did."

"Then you can play again."

The other thing I noticed was everyone was nursing the last of their beers, not wanting a refill in case they had to pay for it. The chance of a free

drink was still on the table, as it were. If these two sorted out their differences.

Then I noticed something else, something I ain't told a living soul since that day. I saw *through* the stranger. For a second, he was like - a faded photograph. Then he was solid again and I thought, had too much strong beer, me. Not that it would stop me having another when this nonsense was sorted out.

"All right."

Wayne looked displeased for a moment, he ain't the world's greatest card player, he'd lose at Snap, for sure, but he suggested it and he had to go with it.

Chev put two beers on the counter, nodding at the two of them. "On the house, you can make up for it later, when you decide."

"Thanks." Wayne took his and drank half the glass down before he looked at the stranger. He hadn't even touched his. "You all right with the bet, sir?" and the 'sir' came out so sarcastic I would have given money to bet the stranger would land him one. He didn't. He inclined his head so slightly you hardly saw it.

"I am indeed." He picked up the beer and walked over to a small table away from everyone. The message was clear, keep out, this is private.

Wayne stomped over, banging his worn out boots on the floor as hard as he could as a way of showing disapproval. Tom Watkins, at the side of me as always, muttered "idiot. He could have paid up and looked big."

I had to agree with him.

Another silence fell over everyone like dust from the never cleaned rafters as the cards were shuffled and cut. Wayne drew the highest card, then they were dealt out.

Now you got to understand I didn't see the cards being laid out, I don't know who held which hand and who put what down. The game went on in near silence for a while, to the point when if drinks hadn't been at stake here, none of us would have sat around and waited patiently for it to end. We would have bought another drink and got on with our conversations, our 'setting the world to rights' talk which every true pub has on every true drinking night.

But we didn't and we watched and we saw from the body language that Wayne was not doing well. He was tense, holding himself very stiff,

muttering under his breath, flicking non-existent dust off his jacket – like that would make a difference.

Then something was said and to this day no one knows what it was. What we do know is – Wayne pulled a knife and in a moment the dark stranger was on the floor, with his breath gone and his heart still. Like it was that quick. Before any of us could move, Wayne turned round and looked at us.

"What did I do?" he asked in such despair it near broke your heart.

Then someone shrieked or shouted or something and we all looked down. The stranger had gone.

And the knife Wayne held was black as sin and it never, from that day to this, showed a scrap of silver once.

Ghost? Revenant, someone said, lovely word, better than ghost any day. Revenant, but what was he doing in the Pig and Bucket and why did he take on Wayne's challenge?

Chev asked around and found out, about a month later, some dark seeming man had met a sorry end in the bar about a hundred years ago. Had he come back to live it out again? He was gone, we would never know.

We do know Wayne wasn't the same man ever again. In fact, he bought the drinks that night and we've hardly seen him since. The few times he does call in someone was bound sure to ask to see the knife, to see if it had gone back to being silver. It hadn't. It didn't.

I know. Wayne gave me the knife one afternoon, called round at my place, asked me to take it off him and keep it, only it was tormenting him, calling him to stab it right into his heart, like he stabbed the stranger and he knew if he kept it, he would.

I check it now and then.

That's how I know it's still black and I don't doubt for a minute it always will be.

The real big problem is, it's calling me now, faint but there. Like I should have stopped it. Like I had the chance to stop it.

Winner Takes All, they say. I think that time old Wayne won, in a manner of speaking, but then lost out big time. And giving the knife to me means I lost out too. I guess I shouldn't have taken it but what do you do when a friend comes calling like that?

Got to admit to a bit of morbid curiosity, too. I wanted to see if it stayed black.

Black as the gleeful thought that went through my mind when the stranger was on the floor, dead as I thought, because he was a stranger. We don't overly care for them in the Pig and Bucket. Especially at 7 o'clock on the last day of the month.

Anyone know who I can pass the knife on to? Only the calling's getting a little louder these days.

About the author:

Dorothy Davies lives and works on the haunted Isle of Wight where she writes her strange stories and edits strange anthologies for Static Movement and Red Skies Press. She is a full member of the Fictioneers.

Primal Smoke

Ron Koppelberger

Waves of fog rolled across the sea of wheat, saffron in rows of undulating harmony, except for the fog. The sky was a thick cloud, impenetrable by the mists that churned and roiled above Rankin Whiskeys head. “Damn, it’s as thick as pea soup.” he said aloud to the empty field of white. Rankin pulled out a pocket watch, his grandfathers embossed with the scratches and tarnished lines of an ancient piece. It was 2:37 p.m. and there was no sign of the sun or the rich cobalt horizon.

In the distance a flock of crows screamed and squawked, faraway and forlorn with the rolling tide of white. Rankin turned and moved back retracing his steps to the front porch. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted and Fern Alsome's dogs barked, “Probably Nothin.” he said aloud to himself, “Probably Nothin.”. The tethers of a cautious farmer bound him to the front porch, he could have sworn he had heard something else, something long forgotten and alone with the fog. Maybe he was just being superstitious, “Probably nothing.” he said again in a whisper.

He had sensed that something was off balance in the yard but he wasn’t sure what. The moan, what about the moan, he had heard a moaning sound coming from the edge of the yard nearest the field. Standing on the worn wooden planks of the front porch he squinted into the fog toward the sound, there it was again, a moan, he knew it was someone moaning. Rankin rubbed his chin feeling the stubble against the tips of his fingers. There it was again, a moan. “Who’s there?” he shouted into the dense fog. The mists parted for an instant and Rankin saw a flash of red and blue. What’s that he thought, it had looked like the bloody face of a man, dressed in blue coveralls.

He thought back for a moment to the curse, it couldn’t be. The curse had been Cross Corners answer to all of the strange happenings that go with any small town. The Curse, they had blamed Leonora Hapscan's pregnancy on the curse and a myriad of other incidents that had gone without explanation in Cross Corners. There it was again, his face in the fog bright red and torn to reveal bone and muscle. Was he seeing things? Was this the curse come to life. He heard the moan again then silence, an eternity of

silence and waiting. “show yourself ghost!” he knew it was just a ghost, it had to be.

About two years earlier two men from Castings International had come into town. They had been unwelcome visitors and the town had challenged them to get their asses out of the Cross, but they had persisted wanting to buy up the fields of wheat that made up the terrain of Cross Corners.

Evan Wigstan had said that they were trespassing on his property when he shot them both dead and no one in town had questioned it, but things started happening after that. The local sheriff had been killed in a multiple car pile up a week later and Angel Contern had hung himself the following Tuesday. The local bar and grill burned down two months later and the next years crop had been a bust for the first time in seventy years. The credited all of these things to a curse poor old Evan and his hot temper.

There it was again, a moaning sound then heavy plodding footsteps through the yard. “What do ya want?” he shouted into the thick fog. The answer came back in the form of a gravely rasp.

“We want yer property Rankin, we want yer property and what belongs to us is for us to take!” The figure in blue overalls moved into view.

Rankin gasped, his face was a leaking series of torn flesh, bleeding and leaking the graveyards rot. The front of his overalls were stained a bright red and maroon, trails of intestine lay in tangled heaps about his feet. “We Want what is ours Rankin and we aim to take it by force if need be!” Rankin inhaled a deep breath of air, sour and full of decay. “We aim to take what rightfully belongs to us!” The other man moved into view and Rankin screamed. His face had been blown almost completely away and a tiny spurt of blood spayed from what was left of his jawbone as he pointed at Rankin, “What is our, what is ours Rankin!” sounded more like “aaaahhhhaaat ith ourrssssss.” as his shattered jaw moved at an angle.

Rankin stepped back and fumbled for the doorknob, “Yer only ghosts, yer only ghosts!” he said as panic began to overwhelm him. The door fell open behind him and he stumbled backward into the house, “Yer only ghosts!”

The two men moved up onto the porch after Rankin, “What is ours Rankin, What is ours Rankin!” Rankin slammed the door shut in the first mans face. Looking down to the edge of the door he saw a small knot of intestine closed in the door frame. “Oh Jesus god!” he gasped. The door

smashed inward and the two stumbled in grabbing Rankin by the hair and hauling him out into the rows of wheat.

The next day they found Rankin on a pole in the midst of his wheat, waves of saffron and clear blue skies calling out gods name. He had been tied to the pole and his eyes were missing, as if he had seen something too terrible to convey. The coroner for Cross corners noted the blood on Rankings cloths as an unusual happenstance. Other than his eyes he was free of wounds. They had tested the blood at the labs in town and it had come back as belonging to something that had been dead a long time.

Ultimately they gave credit to the curse and the ghosts that seemed to haunt Cross Corners.

About the Author:

Ron Koppelberger is a poet, a short story writer and an artist. He has written 102 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. He has been Published in The Stray Branch, The Fringe, Write On!!! (Poetry Magazette) Static Movement, Necrology Shorts and Record Magazine. He is a member of The Poet's society, The Fiction Guild as well as The Isles Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild.

House of Living Shadows

Brian Barnett

A prickling sensation woke Eric Powell. He was only half-aware of his unfamiliar surroundings – trapped in the haze of half-sleep - until another faint tickle crossed his cheek like a whisper in the darkness.

His body stiffened.

For one irrational moment he imagined that during the night his pillow had erupted like a large spider's egg sack. It seemed, for that moment, as if thousands of tiny spiders were coursing from it - tiny black dots scattering across the sheets as they scurried to find dark corners to fill with their webs.

His hand darted for his reading light. After clumsily fumbling in the bedside table drawer, he switched it on. The tiny LED bulbs cast a blue-white cone of faint light across the bed. There was nothing but a sweat-drenched pillow where his head had been.

He took a deep breathy sigh to collect himself and realized that his throat was parched from the dry air. The house was getting the better of him, just like Dale said that it would.

"Beware the Harper House! It's inhabited by angry spirits," Dale said with his theatrically foreboding voice as he cast upward shadows on his face with an upturned flashlight. "The very shadows are alive."

Ludicrous!

Eric only had to last until morning and he would earn an easy hundred bucks. Better yet, he would be able to shove it down Dale Tucker's throat.

The deal with the pillow was nothing more than excited nerves, Eric assured himself. A nightmare is easily brought on with the combination of a strange house and an overactive imagination piqued by endless yarns of its supposed evil characteristics.

A swig of water would wash away what was left of agitated nerves. After that it would only be a few more short hours until morning.

Eric opened the bedroom door. The hallway was especially dark. Perhaps somehow it was even darker than before. *No,* he scolded himself angrily. Nothing is different. Any changes are created by nothing more than my imagination running away with Dale's stories. Thanks Dale, you *prick*.

Eric stepped into the hall and noticed that the adjacent bedroom door was slightly ajar. Eric had closed it before. He was sure of it. Well, almost sure of it.

Enough!

Eric continued down the hallway in spite of himself. *In the morning, I'll take the money with one hand and knock out that idiot Dale with the other,* he thought.

The hallway gave way to the living room which adjoined the dining room. The rooms were lit slightly better than the hallway thanks to some pale light that bled through the dusty windows. Navigating the house would not be as difficult as he had initially assumed.

A nearby streetlamp cast a yellow glow against the dining room window. The sallow window shade, tinged decay and age, barely kept the light out. As Eric approached, a shadow traipsed across the shade. He stopped and stood breathless and rigid.

The shadow appeared to be thin gnarled fingers that massaged the air. They extended and flexed slowly, rhythmically, yet stiff as if beckoning Eric to the window.

His chest tightened but he willed himself to approach the shade. It's only a trick of light and shadows, he strained himself to believe. It is nothing more than a few tree limbs - nothing more at all. He slid his shaky finger through the dusty shade-pull ring and gave a quick tug.

The shade coiled up, stirring a plume of dust, and the streetlamp light, waxen from the window's dinge, flooded the room. There was no tree outside the window. There was nothing even close by. In fact there was nothing anywhere but the lonely streetlamp twenty or so meters away.

Eric swallowed dryly again and wiped his moistened brow. His mind raced, frantically searching for an explanation for the horrible shadow puppet show that he had just watched.

Dale!

Dale must be outside. Of course! He's trying to sabotage me, Eric fumed. He wants me to fail – no, he *needs* me to fail! Not only would he be out a hundred bucks, but he would have to admit that he was more of a coward than me. He didn't even last an hour in this place.

A smug grin crawled across Eric's face. With renewed vigor, he continued to the sink. It would take a lot more than feeble shadow-puppetry to scare one mister Eric S. Powell away. He lifted the faucet handle yet no

water came out. The pipes pounded violently throughout the framework of the house. It was as if the house's heart had jumpstarted and was both rapid and very audible.

Eric's heart did the same.

The sink belched and spat. Eric felt along the wall and found a grimy light switch. He flicked it on. The overhead bulb hesitated and flickered inside its glass fly-carcass-filled fixture before it finally remained on.

The sink was spattered with dirty crimson. The water flowed in violent torrents that paused and then sputtered irregularly. *Could it really be blood*? Eric allowed himself to wonder temporarily.

The water began to clear and flow easier. *No, it was rust*. He angrily admitted. *Get a grip!* The house had fooled him again. No, his *imagination* had fooled him again.

He cupped his hands and allowed them to fill with the acrid water. He brought his hands to his face and examined the water's smell. It was very earthy and metallic. He allowed it to seep through his fingers and back into the sink, which left tiny bits of sediment on his hands. His fingers felt grimy and gritty as he dried them on his pants.

Eric shut off the faucet and flicked off the light. The room, in contrast, went completely dark again. The only light was the sickly yellow glow that bled through the milky windows over the dining room. He paused for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

He started back to the bedroom when he saw the hands again. They crawled across the floor like stiff, gangly crabs.

Dale!

Eric crept silently toward the window. Catching Dale in the act should be enough to default the bet. Eric needed no better excuse to force Dale to hand over the hundred dollars. After that, he would stay the night just to spite him. That'd show the prick.

The floorboards creaked slightly, but the knobby fingers continued to flail slowly in the lamplight like stiff, arthritic sea anemones.

Eric was only inches away from the window's edge when he leapt to surprise Dale. As before, there was no tree, but there was no Dale either.

Eric turned and the shadows were gone again. A bead of sweat ran from his temple to his cheek. He quickly wiped it away with a trembling hand and attempted to calm his mind in order to rationalize the house.

The very shadows are alive.

Dale's words mocked him. He angrily forced them away as if they were swirling flies. Shadows cannot live, he angrily decried. They just lay there, dead, to remind you that the light cannot wash away all the darkness in the world, no matter how hard it tries. Nighttime is the shadows' domain. They *own* the night.

Eric shuddered. He was beginning to creep *himself* out.

A good night's sleep would do some good, he decided. Only a few short hours to go. He swallowed dryly.

Eric quietly padded around the dusty dining room table and entered the hallway. He froze when he heard a faint thump. He stood completely still to analyze all the stray noises throughout the house. There was no denying that there was a sound; however, every sound has an explanation. It is only a small matter to identify and rationalize it.

A slow, dual-octave moan came from the front door. It was as if the gates of Hell themselves were grinding open.

Dale?

Eric turned and slowly peeked around the hallway corner to the front door. It continued to open slowly and loudly until finally it came to a rest against the wall.

Eric stood staring wide-eyed, searching for what had caused the door to open. He would have heard the squeaking hinges of the storm door if someone had come from the outside to open it. Surely, in the house's dead silence, he would have heard footsteps approaching and leaving the door if someone had opened it from inside. What then? What caused the door to open? Furthermore, what was that muffled thump before it began its shrill screech?

The house had settled.

Yes, that's it! The house must have settled which caused the door to unlatch. That happens all the time, even in new homes. Surely in a house this old it was inevitable, especially now that it has a visitor walking in its neglected halls. The extra weight shifted the house just enough to cause the door to open. That was the most obvious explanation.

He craned his neck around the corner to see if anyone was standing outside the storm door. There was nothing but a distant porch light from a neighbor's house.

Eric walked softly to the door and gently wrapped his fingers around the doorknob. He expected for Dale to run up to the storm door and bang on

its glass for a cheap laugh, but he only saw his own face, exhausted from lack of sleep and worry, reflecting back at him. He was ashamed. The house *was* getting the better of him.

He slammed the door shut and fidgeted with the doorknob until finally the latch clicked into the door frame. It had been out of sync all along, he thought with considerable relief. It was a wonder that the door had remained closed for as long as it had.

He sighed again. He realized that his chest tightened slightly as if his stress had settled into it. This is stupid, he grumbled to himself. Only a few short hours to go, he reassured himself as he ran his fingers through his sweat-drenched hair.

Eric walked, head-down, into the hallway. The walls somehow seemed to darken further the more he advanced. The darkness began to close in more, becoming almost stifling. Strange, he thought, how something as simple as the absence of light can seem to smother you.

His footfalls seemed to reverberate differently, as if something – or someone – was right behind him. He had a sensation that someone at any moment would grab his shoulder, spin him around, and hack him to pieces with a dull, rusty ax. Or maybe a spirit would reach its icy ethereal arm through his ribcage and crush his heart to a pulp. He felt himself tensing up in anticipation.

He bit his lip and trudged forward to spite the feeling – to spite Dale and his stupid stories – to spite the house and its stupid dancing shadows and self-opening doors. Dale can shove his hundred dollars right up-

A brief wispy rush of sound came from the back of the house. It was like a foreboding whisper from the darkness. But where did it come from? From the laundry room? The utility closet?

Surely the furnace kicked on. The pilot light sprang to life with a brief roar of flame, nothing more. But how could that be? The house was already insufferably hot. The thermostat must be on the fritz.

It was nothing! Nothing at all!

He was able to dismiss the sound to a degree, but he could not shake the feeling that someone or some-*thing* was standing just behind him and closing in with each step that he took.

He walked quickly with rigid tension the rest of the way to the bedroom. He passed the adjacent bedroom again. Its door was completely

open. His heart gave a sharp twinge of fear. He knew for absolute fact that it had been only slightly ajar before.

Passing it was torture. It was like an impossible void of darkness. Somehow it gave off a sort of empty, hollow sound as he passed. He refused to look inside. He ducked his head further, tucking his chin against his chest, and entered his bedroom, panting.

His hands shook.

Nerves, he thought. Just my nerves playing tricks. There is nothing odd about the house. The night had been playing tricks with the shadows. That, and coupled with Dale's idiotic stories, any person would be bound to get a little nervous in an old, dark house.

Eric returned to the bed. His pillow was still damp from sweat. He rolled to his side, but could not bring himself to close his eyes.

Yet he would not allow himself to believe that he was afraid of an invisible *something* that may sneak up on him at any moment. He silently repeated to himself that he was just too wired to sleep, that's all. Too much caffeine - too much coffee. It became his irrational mantra as he unconsciously rocked back and forth on the mattress.

Too much caffeine – too much coffee.

Too much caffeine – too much coffee.

When he became aware of it, he huffed angrily at himself and snatched his book from the bedside table. He clicked on his book light and settled into the bed.

He couldn't concentrate on the words. His mind wouldn't focus. He repeatedly found himself midway through a page, not realizing what he had just read as his mind drifted toward the house.

What was it that caused those god-awful shadows? What caused the bedroom door to open? The *front* door?

He nervously fidgeted with the pages as he attempted to refocus his eyes on the words. They all seemed to blur and blend together. Finally he tossed the book aside and turned off the reading light. Soon enough sleep would take hold. Then in the morning he would shove it in Dale's face.

Eric closed his eyes and strained to keep his mind blank. He attempted to keep out the images of the shadowy hands and the bloody sink. He attempted to forget the strange thud and the squealing hinges.

Something thumped nearby, but he ignored it. Clearly it was just the house settling again. Think nothing more of it. Only the dark and splendid

silence would sate him now. He blocked out what remained of his self-damaging thoughts. Only a few more short hours...

He was snapped aware again when the moaning of door hinges blasted through the silent house like a jackhammer.

The front door had been latched. That was the only thing about the whole uncertainty of the evening's events that Eric could guarantee. He distinctly remembered lifting the doorknob so that the latch would catch. Yet, somehow the door had come dislodged again.

He contemplated about leaving it as it was. It seemed as if it was going to open regardless of what precautions he took. Inevitably it would just open again sometime during the night.

No, he decided. The door needed to be closed. If for no other reason, the real monsters of the world lurked in the neighborhood alleyways at night. Vandals, burglars, drug dealers, vagrants, rapists, murderers – they were all tangible dangers. It won't take but a minute to close the door and prop a chair against it, he decided.

He groaned up to a sitting position. The room seemed hotter than it had before for some reason. In fact, it seemed like someone else may have entered the room at some point. Eric noticed that every move he made had a slight muffled reverberation as if someone was in close proximity.

Absurd!

The door and the windows had been shut all night. If anyone would have entered, he would have known. Yet, some nagging impulse led him to believe that he was *not* alone. He felt around blindly on the bedside table for his reading light.

He clicked it on and its tiny LED lights only dimly lit the room. He strained his eyes, feebly willing them to cut through the impossible darkness. There was nobody in the room as far as he could tell.

Eric clicked off his reading light and slid it into his pocket. He took a step toward the bedroom door and awkwardly tripped over something. Whatever it was, it rolled clumsily under his foot.

A shoe?

He dug the reading light back out of his pocket and knelt down. It *was* a shoe. It seemed so out of place. It was much newer than anything else in the house. He turned it over in his hands and then dropped it.

The side of it was wet. With shaking hands, Eric examined his fingers with the reading light. They were patched with something damp and red. He

had an idea what the red wetness was, but he would not allow himself to believe it.

That Dale, he thought. He planted a shoe. He smeared it with fake blood and left it for me to find. He forced a shallow laugh. He wanted to say 'H*a ha*, Dale, the joke's on you. I'm not falling for it'. But he couldn't muster any words. The pit of his stomach was a tumult of dread.

His heart pounded violently. His arms and legs felt prickly and heavy. The seed of reality had sprouted and began to slowly mature through his conscious. The shoe had not been there before Dale left. In fact, the shoe had not been there long at all. It was still warm when he had it in his hands.

Something thumped against the ceiling overhead. Eric's breathing became shallow and irregular. He contemplated against it for a moment before he finally forced himself to angle the reading light upward.

Something dark twitched away from the light.

Eric slowly climbed to his feet, needing, yet dreading a closer view. The tiny cone of light swept frantically across the dark backdrop.

As he grew nearer to the ceiling, the faint blue-hued LED funnel spread and slowly washed away the shadows. The shadows seemed to be impossibly...thick, almost viscous, like oil. Eric watched in amazement as they seemingly oozed away. He noticed that after they had cowered away, they uncovered something on the ceiling.

Dale!?

As Dale's torso was released from the shadows, he slumped downward. His shirt was tattered, as if eaten by battery acid. His flesh was badly burned, it seemed. His eyes remained closed as his arms lolled limply downward. Blood trickled down and dripped silently into the darkness.

Eric brought the light closer to Dale's face which allowed the shadows to darken the rest of his body. He slapped him weakly on his bloody cheeks. They were hot, damp, and sticky.

"Wake up! Wake up, Dale!"

Dale remained still and silent.

With the absence of the light, the shadows began to reclaim Dale's raw, smoldering torso.

Eric quickly raised the light back to the ceiling. Almost as if flinching from something painful, the oily shadows backed away until it released Dale's legs, one at a time. His pants were partially dissolved. His right shoe

was missing as he was finally surrendered. It was Dale's shoe that was on the floor and covered with blood, Eric realized grimly.

Eric tried as best as he could manage to break Dale's fall, but he slammed awkwardly to the floor.

He patted Dale's cheeks and listened for a heartbeat. There was none. His chest was still. He was not breathing. Dale was dead.

A crushing pain ascended Eric's ankle and leg. Something suffocated the pores in his skin and tugged with enormous pressure. An intense heat burned at his ankle. He wheeled the light around and saw that the inky shadows were clamping down on him.

The very shadows are alive.

Dale's ridiculous words repeated in Eric's head again. There was no way to deny them anymore. The shadows *were* alive, and they were ravenous.

The light forced the shadows to slide away from his lower leg slowly, almost angrily. His burning skin was the worst pain he could ever remember. It was as if all of his nerve endings had been set on fire. He slid to the door and struggled to his feet.

He limped down the hallway, dragging his screaming leg behind him. The adjacent bedroom door was closed again, but he ignored it. He reached the end of the hall. The pale light from the streetlamp bled into the dining room. The shadowy hands clamored to reach for Eric's ankle as he painfully ambled past.

The front door stood open. Only the storm door stood in his way to freedom. He was within mere feet when the front door slammed shut.

Eric's heart dropped. He gripped the doorknob with both hands and twisted and pulled at it violently. It did not budge.

All around him, the walls seemed to darken. The inky black shadows flowed over the door frame. They oozed over the chipped paint on the door, toward Eric's clamoring hands.

He turned to run for a window, but all of the windows had been blotted out. All except for the dining room. It was as if the entire house had gone black aside from one blemish of wonderful, hopeful light.

Eric ran as fast as his burning leg would allow. The whole house seemed to churn, as if all the shadows had come to life independently, clamoring for a piece of him. The floor began to quiver. The walls oozed like hot icing bleeding down the sides of a layer cake.

Eric was within three steps of the wonderful light when he ran into a gooey wall of interwoven strands. Like a fly in a spider's web, Eric feebly struggled against the unrelenting restraints that held him in place.

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Over the years, the house had eaten countless vagrants, stray animals and unwary insects. Tonight it had caught two full-grown, healthy men. It had been a good night. The shadows were fully awake with the fervor and energy that they had long-since forgotten. They had fun with their second course. It had been years since they were able to play with their food.

Just before Eric's liquefied body dribbled to the floor, he had reached weakly toward the light. It had remained mere inches from his reach, teasing him as he felt his bones soften. He had felt his skin bubble and melt under the acidic shadows of the house. He had felt his insides boil and then slowly drain as they were siphoned from him. Then, once the house had had its fill, it allowed his tarry remains to dribble to the floor, becoming another small portion of the house of the living shadows.

About the Author:

Brian Barnett lives in Frankfort, Kentucky with his wife, Stephanie, and his two sons.

The Twin Ghost

Olivia Arieti

Earl George wasn't born evil but the painful events of his life changed his personality so deeply that even the nobleman's servants shuddered at his sight. Whatever order was carried out hurriedly and in particular his chamber maids kept away from him as much as possible, fearing his vicious glare and manners.

Sadly, the Earl's father, the Count, died soon after his birth, and his mother, the Countess, after lonely years of total devotion to her husband's memory and only child, resolved to marry again. The widow's choice turned out to be an unfortunate one for the Baron, her new husband, was a man of cruel nature, whose soul was pervaded by a morbid perversion he eagerly sought to satisfy. Also his past was stained with darkness. His wife had mysteriously died a few months after giving birth to their twin girls, Edith and Virginia. The former passed away short after her mother's death, while the latter was sent to some distant relative in a remote and foreign country.

After years of complete dissolution, the Baron's debauchery had led him to the brink of bankruptcy and the acquaintance with the beautiful and wealthy Countess was highly welcomed, the opportunity of marrying her, even more. Courting the lonely widow was an easy game and within a few months the wedding ceremony was celebrated. The Baron now could go back to his vicious life at last.

The young Earl began hating the man who had taken away his most precious object of affection as soon as he had been informed of the wedding. The same occurred to the Baron, who immediately after, made the child go through all kinds of humiliations and unfair punishments in front of his terrified wife. The child's hate grew into a dreadful rage when he saw how his step-father, with rude and harsh manners, treated his mother. Very often he heard her crying and saw bruises on her arms and face. He was on the point of doing something horrible when the Baron urged him to prepare to leave. The nobleman decided to send the boy to a boarding school abroad and made him depart without bidding his mother farewell. George's loud cries resounded in the halls but all the desperate woman could do was

run to the window and watch the black carriage hurriedly fade in the early morning mist.

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The notice of the death of the Countess came as a great shock to the young Earl who had already spent long years of homesickness and suffering.

The sad event had taken place during a walk with the Baron. The unscrupulous fellow, wishing to dispose of his wife's wealth as he pleased, decided to get rid of her. Early one evening, he led the woman to one of the highest cliffs in order to make her enjoy the breath-taking view of the sun languidly dying in the horizon, when unfortunately, as he reported, she slipped and fell into the deep waters beneath.

George understood the horrible truth at once and swore revenge. While waiting for the right moment to return to his property, he spent all his time meditating on how he could most hurt the mischievous man or rather destroy him. His heart had hardened and now a cruel glare could be perceived in his eyes. His manners too had become harsh and rude… almost like the Baron's.

In the meantime, Virginia, who had grown into a lovely and graceful maiden, had been called by her father to the estate.

The Baron decided to eliminate one after the other, the components of his family in order to dispose freely of all wealth and continue his dissolute life totally undisturbed. Virginia's turn had arrived.

Early one morning this time, the nobleman took his daughter up to the edge of that same cliff and while she was joyously admiring the dawn delicately painting the horizon pink, he abruptly pulled her towards him and with a hoarse voice, cursed the day she was born.

Then he was about to push her down, when for some inexplicable reason a sudden whirlwind rose and its violence invested the Baron making him precipitate straight into the roaring waters, where he disappeared, just like the poor Countess. A spectral shadow hovered over the almost paralysed Virginia and a loud coarse laughter could be heard. The girl was horrified and ran back to the mansion crying for help.

The body of the Baron was never found. It was said that it had plunged into hell directly.

Virginia had never known about her sister, but Edith, now a ghost, had always kept watch on her. As a matter of fact, the child, after witnessing the Baron murdering her mother, had grown into a horrible supernatural creature nurtured by evil and hate. Although she appeared as beautiful as her sister, her essence was made of wickedness. Virginia though, strangely remained her only object of affection. Furthermore, as her twin, Edith felt the girl her mortal counterpart… the fresh incarnation of her own lost flesh.

The ghost's hate was transformed into deadly wrath as soon as she perceived the Earl's perfidious intentions.

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By the time George returned home, he looked much older; the wrinkles under his eyes betrayed the weariness of his sleepless nights. His wrath had almost driven him wild. The pleasure of learning of the Baron's death wasn't enough to satisfy his urge to revenge. Personally he hadn't been responsible for it, therefore he still felt the pressing need to destroy whatever belonged to the man or to his memory.

On seeing Virginia, the Earl immediately realized how his wicked aim could be achieved.

The girl instead, felt her heart leap when she first met the handsome man, who with great satisfaction noticed it. He also noticed the pendant falling from her neck. An uncontrollable rage possessed him for the jewel had belonged to his mother, the Count's present on the day of their child's birth. Many times he had played with it while falling asleep in the Countess's arms. With menacing steps and an even more menacing glare, he rushed towards her, lifted his hand and was on the point of tearing off the jewel when a loud peal of thunder made the panes shudder. The blazing flashes of lightning that followed and the violent wind that penetrated the room through a window slammed open, blew the candles out. Darkness had cast its lugubrious shadow all around them.

Impassive, the Earl pulled the girl towards him, took the pendant in his hand and said angrily, "It belonged to my mother".

Then controlling his impetus, he added with a tight smile, "It looks beautiful on you, my dear."

As their eyes met, the dismayed girl shuddered. George's vicious glare was frightening but at the same time so penetrating, that she felt completely naked in front of him, devoured by an unfamiliar lustful attraction towards the man, who recognized her wishful glance at once. Taking the girl's innocence would be a pleasant challenge. The only thing worth taking, apart her own life, the Earl viciously thought. Then he stepped away abruptly, swearing to himself he would also take the precious jewel.

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Virginia's snow white breast, throbbing against his, the smoothness of her skin kindled lustful feelings also in the morbid Earl who decided to wait no longer. He would make her go through all the humiliations and sadistic punishments he himself had suffered, afterwards. Passion and rage converged in a dangerous and perverse blend. The man rejoiced. He felt like a thirsty vampire, with the difference that he wanted to drain pleasure out of the tender fleshed virgin instead of blood. His only regret was that the Baron couldn't see his mischievous deeds.

George invited Virginia to his room that night with the excuse that he had to reveal a secret of the most importance.

The girl was quite upset by her step-brother's words. Also his strange behaviour puzzled her but the curiosity and desire to see him were above all. She accepted the invitation. Surprisingly, her bedroom door was locked. She couldn't get out.

She began knocking and calling loudly, as the trepidation to reach her hero was growing more and more into a desperate craving. All in vain, for no one in the whole mansion seemed to hear her cries.

The wind was blowing more furiously now, the long branches of the trees sweeping against the massive walls of the building, filled the room with dancing shadows, while the shrieking of old shutters, resounded in the dark. Virginia felt scared… She was sure something horrible was about to happen. In tears, she threw herself on the bed and fell into a nightmare more terrifying than the incessant fury of the tempest.

Somehow the increasing violence of the storm had upset the Earl as well. Creepy whispers came from the wind penetrating through the creaks of the old window panes, while the flames of the big fireplace flickered

restlessly, casting strange shadows in his room as well. He was pacing the floor nervously, irritated by the girl's delay. Then he began cursing loudly, his lust dripping from his pores, lips, hands so eager to mark with passionate shame her immaculate body. Suddenly he heard the key turning in the door and quite amazed stepped back. But, as no one entered, George rushed out of the room and cast a glance in the long corridor. Nobody was there either, nor could any steps be heard. He was determined to go and fetch the girl for himself when Edith, apparently from nowhere, appeared on the threshold. The Earl of course, had never been aware either of her birth or death, therefore couldn't doubt she was Virginia.

"At last", he exclaimed, betraying his impatience, "I was about to come to your room and bang down the door."

""It takes time to prepare for such a special evening", whispered the ghost softly…

Quite surprised, George moved towards her. His glance immediately fell on the pendant shining mockingly on her white breast. Its strong glitter almost blurred his sight. Covering it with his hand, he greedily started kissing her. Edith pushed him away.

"You are too impatient, my dear… I believe you should propose at least, before going further…"

"Propose?" laughed the man, "You really can't believe I would marry the daughter of such a perfidious monster… The least you could be is a wicked witch… or," he whispered as he moved close again, "a stupid whore." Then added sneering, "I wouldn't mind that." and laughing loudly, pulled her down on his bed determined to win whatever resistance.

Wild fits of rage pervaded the ghost, so violent as to seem of human quality.

As the delirious Earl tore open her white laced gown, ripping all buttons, ribbons and the strings of the tight corset, a horrible chest of bones appeared to the rapacious man. Edith's head began losing all hair and the lovely face macabrely turned into a horrid skull with two deep sockets as black as pitch.

"I have come to take you with me, you bloody bastard," a sepulchral voice cried, "before you harm my sister, Virginia."

"Your sister?" muttered the horrified man, "Who… who are you?"

"Edith, Virginia's dead twin", she replied moving her frightening jaws, "You will come with me to the viscera of hell where my father, the

Baron is waiting for you."

"No, no… " pleaded the man, "wait…"

"You have equalled him in vice and evil and from now on you will burn together."

Then her lethal hands tightened around his throat. Dark blood started dripping from the

Earl's mouth as a proof of the evil within his own body. The pendant was now hanging from his rigid hand.

With another coarse laughter, Edith vanished in the fury of the tempest.

***

When Virginia woke up the following morning, the wind was still howling wild and a heavy rain was falling. Cold shivers pervaded her as she seemed to perceive strange or rather sepulchral moans from the outside. She ran to the door and surprisingly found it unlocked. Immediately the girl rushed into the Earl's room where the lugubrious sounds seemed to come from. The door was wide open, the windows as well. The moans now turned into macabre curses that resounded louder and louder. Her blood ran cold. She started calling him desperately. Just as the preceding night, no one answered her cries. She saw the jewel lying on his bed casting a ghastly light. Frightened by that sinister atmosphere, Virginia hurriedly returned to her room.

Apparently the young man had disappeared. As a matter of fact no one ever saw him again. Some, aware of his dissolute and bizarre behaviour, suggested he had gone abroad; others said that the devil himself must have taken him just as he had done with the cruel Baron.

Whatever, Virginia was so desperate that she began sleepwalking and talking to herself… even if everyone would swear she was not alone…

Quite often at nightfall a disturbing presence could be seen approaching the mansion and entering her room. Then coarse laughter or sepulchral screams could be heard for the whole night. The candles projected two women's shadows on the wall. One always left just before the crow of the cock the following morning.

It was said that the mansion had become haunted and Virginia prey of some supernatural creature. Nobody could know that the girl had met her

sister at last nor how strong ties between twins could be… so strong as to go on binding them inextricably together despite the two different worlds they may be living in.

About the author:

This US citizen and high School English teacher lives in Italy with her family. Her plays have been published by Brooklyn Publishers, Heuer Publishing, Desert Road Publishing, JAC Publishing & Promotions, USA, Lazy Bee Scripts, UK. Her poems appeared in Women In Judaism, The Wanderlust Review, Poetica Magazine, Eye On Life, VWA: Poems For Haiti, Cliterature, The Harsh And The Heart Anthology, Pagan Friends, Bridging the Cultural Divide Anthology Phatitude Magazine; her short stories in The Smoking Poet, Enchanted Conversations, Daily Bites Of Flesh 2011 Pill Hill Press, Voices From The Garage, Riverbabble, Halloween Anthology Magic Cat Press, Christmas Warmth Anthology Xoxo Publishing. “The Forest Eyes” has been recently accepted by the Legend And Lore Anthology Static Movement.

Fear Itself

Dempsey Wilson

The tiny bush plane bucked and fishtailed in the turbulence, making for a nauseatingly rough ride. Because the plane was so small, the passengers could see the pilot clearly, and noticed he was very calm--very composed. This helped them to fight the urge to panic, and to stay calm themselves.

The cargo on this particular flight consisted of four passengers, one pilot, and several hundred pounds of camera and audio equipment. Their destination: The Aokigahara Forest, Japan, where they would film an episode of their reality TV show, "Fear Itself."

Though there were many reality shows that proclaim to hunt ghosts and other mythical creatures, Jericho Wyman, host of "Fear Itself," was determined to be the first to do it for real. His belief in the supernatural, coupled with his great desire to get good ratings, drove him to work at a tireless pace. He was as fearless as he was arrogant.

"Is that normal, man?" said the show's soundman, Percy, referring to the turbulence. His face had become an alarming shade of greenish-yellow, and he held a tiny vomit bag at the ready.

"Totally normal, Percy. No worries. But seriously, man, I doubt that puke sack is big enough to hold all three pounds of sushi you ate at the Tokyo Airport," said Jericho, first smiling, and then bulging his cheeks out while he made gagging noises deep in his throat.

Percy Gullen closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to choke back the surging vomit that crept ever upward in his throat. The attempt was futile, and Percy quickly filled the inadequate receptacle.

"Jesus, Percy, did you swallow that sushi whole?" asked Ross Fowler, cameraman for the show, as he winced in disgust. "At least it won't show up on that tie-dye shirt," he finished, winking at Jericho.

Percy sealed the vomit bag and hastily opened another just in time. He ended up filling three bags in all, looking deathly ill when he was through. "No more sushi, man," he said, in a weak, faltering voice.

Ikaru Oda, the film crew's guide for this trip, sat and watched this exchange with a look of bewilderment on his clean-shaven face. He didn't like Americans very much, and was a little repelled by their mannerisms.

Out of the three men that made up the crew for the show, Ikaru liked Percy the best. He was a bit of a hippie, with long, curly hair, a tie-dye shirt and khaki shorts. Percy was friendly and unassuming, which was the polar opposite of Jericho's disposition.

Ross Fowler seemed friendly enough, but Ikaru found him to be brash and loud; traits considered repugnant by most traditional Japanese.

Percy looked around and saw that Ikaru was looking at him with an odd expression. He smiled weakly and held a tremulous hand up as if to say, “I'm okay.”

Ikaru nodded curtly and redirected his gaze forward.

“Hey, Iky, know any more ghost stories?” said Jericho, grinning expectantly. “The last one wasn't really a ghost story.”

This was another reason for Ikaru to dislike Jericho. Though he knew the American wasn't being purposely annoying, he still didn't like being called “Iky.” He took a deep breath and briefly searched his memory for a suitable ghost story. There was one story that actually pertained to the area they were going to, but Ikaru didn't want to tell that story. Not just yet.

He had already told them the story of Kiyoko, a beautiful waitress that worked in a teahouse, who met a handsome visiting monk one day. He soon fell in love with Kiyoko, and she him. The relationship violated the monk's vows, and he eventually cut all ties with Kiyoko. This enraged her and she swore to get revenge on her ex-lover.

Kiyoko journeyed to the temple of Kompera to learn the art of dark magic. After studying for sometime, Kiyoko transformed herself into a dragon and flew to the monastery where her ex-lover resided. The handsome monk saw her coming and hid inside the large bell that sat atop the highest tower. But Kiyoko saw him and belched a huge jet of sustained fire onto the bell, melting it and killing the monk that hid within.

Suddenly, a ghost story popped into his head, and Ikaru began telling the three men the story of Yoshin and Taka. Taka was the wife of a masterless Samurai, Yoshin, who met a strange man one day while walking through the village. This strange, old man offered to find Yoshin a master on the condition he would marry his granddaughter upon attainment of said master. He agreed to the deal, and the old man soon found him a suitable master. He then decided to kill his pregnant wife, and then kill the old man so he would not have to marry his granddaughter, thereby freeing himself of

any responsibility, which allowed him to dedicate himself fully to his new master.

Soon after he had killed his wife and the old man, her ghost, and the ghost of his unborn son, began haunting Yoshin everywhere he went. They did not give him one moment's peace, and he soon regretted his actions. They haunted him until his dying day, ultimately causing him to commit seppuku out of shame.

After Ikaru finished, Jericho nodded his head and made a “hmm,” noise. Apparently, he wasn't terribly impressed with that particular story. “I liked the dragon-lady story better,” he finished.

“The moral of the story is,” began Fowler, “never piss a woman off!”

“Yeah,” confirmed Percy, still looking pale and nauseated.

The plane was now high above Mount Fuji, and began to gradually descend over the thick forest below, until they were skirting the treetops. The pilot turned in his chair and said something in rapid Japanese to Ikaru.

“What did he say?” asked Jericho, raising his voice above the engines.

“He said we land soon,” replied Ikaru in perfect English.

“Yes!” Jericho was obviously excited to get started with the fieldwork.

“Oh, good,” said Percy, relieved that they would soon be on the ground.

After making a flawless landing on a seemingly insufficient runway, the four men deplaned and began off-loading their gear. The pilot walked up to Ikaru, and they exchanged a few words in their native language. As they spoke, the pilot glanced over at Jericho, frowned at him, gave Ikaru a curt bow, then turned and climbed back aboard his plane.

“What did he say?” asked Jericho, curious what the pilot said.

“He said,” started Ikaru, searching for something to supplant what the pilot had actually said. “He said good luck,” which he hadn't. In truth, the pilot had told Ikaru to keep an eye on the stupid Americans, especially the arrogant one: Jericho.

“I don't believe in luck,” replied Jericho, looking smug.

“But you believe in ghosts?” said Ikaru, his brow furrowed.

“That's why we're here, right!” Jericho grinned confidently.

“Roger that,” confirmed Fowler.

Looking around, Percy said, “This looks like Colorado..sort of,” referring to the abundance of trees and foliage surrounding the tiny airport. Percy hailed from Boulder, Colorado. He had grown up in the mountains, as his parents were both old-school hippies and believed that nature was the best environment to raise children in. They were probably right.

Parked roughly twenty yards from the plane, sat two Land Rovers, undoubtedly their transportation. Each man grabbed as much gear as he could and walked over to the waiting SUVs. Soon the vehicles were loaded and they departed the airfield. Ikaru piloted the lead vehicle, with Percy riding shotgun, and Fowler drove the other, with Jericho in the passenger seat.

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As they drove into the shadow of the sacred Mount Fuji, Ikaru turned to Percy and said, “You should not have come here. It is truly dangerous. So many people die here.”

Percy, who had just begun to feel a little relief from his nausea, felt his stomach flip-flop anew with this statement. It wasn't just what Ikaru had said, but rather how he said it, with a look of sincere trepidation. “Not really, though--right?” he asked, hoping Ikaru would suddenly smile and say, “Gotcha!”

Ikaru didn't smile. He didn't change the expression on his face. “Why do you think they call it The Suicide Forest?”

“That's all real, dude?” said Percy, his nausea suddenly turning into an icy fear.

“In 1998, seventy-three bodies were removed from Aokigahara Forest. In 2002, seventy-eight bodies were removed. There are new suicides every year, and no one really knows how many bodies go undiscovered.”

“Undiscovered? You mean they're still out there--where we're going?” Percy's voice raised an octave with the last part of the question.

“Yes, where we are going right now,” he said. “There is also a book,” he continued, “one which serves as a manual for suicide. Many of the recent bodies found in the Aokigahara Forest, were found clutching this manual in their dead hands.”

“A manual for suicide?” Percy's panic made him parrot everything Ikaru was saying, as if his mind simply couldn't grasp the information now

swirling about his thoughts.

“This is considered the most haunted place in all of Japan, and for good reason,” said Ikaru. “It is a Purgatory for the *Yurei,* the unsettled ghosts who were torn from life far too soon, and now howl their torment on the winds.”

“I don't wanna hear anymore, dude,” said Percy, closing his eyes and shaking his head; a nervous habit of his when he faced things he didn't understand, or want to understand. “You're freakin' me out, man.”

“Good,” said Ikaru. “Fear can be healthy. It can sometimes keep you from doing something stupid,” he finished, raising an eyebrow at Percy.

“Tell Jericho and Fowler that stuff,” said Percy, sounding irritated. “They're into things like that.”

“I intend to,” replied Ikaru, and then returned his full attention to the winding road ahead.

Less than forty minutes later, they reached their intended destination, which the Japanese government hesitantly allowed them to inhabit for no more than seventy-two hours. At first, they had denied Jericho a permit to film in this area, but he stubbornly persisted and eventually obtained the proper permits.

With a practiced efficiency, Jericho and Fowler began unloading the camera gear, while Percy began readying his audio equipment. Ikaru took advantage of that moment to tell them what he'd told Percy on the way there.

To his surprise, the stories only seemed to motivate Jericho even more. Ikaru had expected, at the very least, a mildly fearful reaction. Even Fowler appeared invigorated by the warnings, instead of detoured.

“Spiritualists believe that even the trees are consumed with malevolent energy,” persisted Ikaru.

Fowler glanced around and said, “They're alive,” in a facetious tone.

Jericho laughed and said, “All the better, man.”

Ikaru persevered. “When the forest workers find a body, they bring it to their base. They have a special room reserved just for these suicides, which contains only two beds standing side by side. One bed is for the corpse, and the other bed is for the unfortunate worker that has to spend the night with the dead body.”

“What the hell do they do that for?” asked Jericho, looking mystified, if not offended.

“Because,” began Ikaru, his tone becoming more serious, “they believe that if they left the *Yurei* alone, it will scream throughout the entire night, and the body would move itself into the regular sleeping quarters. The worker is there to keep the corpse from wandering off.”

“That's fuckin' silly, man,” said Fowler.

“Whatever, Iky, you're not scaring me away,” asserted Jericho, smiling priggishly at Ikaru, and then went back to his busy-work with the gear.

“Maybe you guys should listen to him,” Percy said, suddenly appearing next to Ikaru.

“I'm afraid they are beyond that,” said Ikaru, then gave a curt bow and walked a short distance away.

“Got yer shit ready, Perc,” Jericho asked, ignoring Percy's suggestion.

“Yeah, I'm good to go, man,” said Percy, his voice tinged with apprehension.

“Fowler?”

“Locked and loaded.”

“Well, then,” Jericho said, “let's move out!”

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After an hour and a half of walking along a trail, Jericho decided to stop and rest for a few minutes. In Japan, it was summer, and temperatures usually hovered around ninety degrees this time of year. It was hot and muggy: not good conditions for people or equipment.

“Hey,” said Jericho, looking at Ikaru, “what's with the signs along the path? What do they say?”

Ikaru glanced at Jericho, and then turned his gaze outward, into the thick forest. “Some say, “Please Reconsider,” and others say, “Please consult police before you decide to die.”

“That's weird,” Jericho said, his confident expression wavering for a brief moment.

“That's what they really say?” questioned Fowler; suspicious that Ikaru was pulling their collective legs.

“Yes, that is really what the signs say,” confirmed Ikaru, not looking at Fowler.

“Fowler, get some video of this area and that sign. We'll do a little narrative segment with me standing beneath the sign and telling what it says, and why the Japanese government feels they need to put such signs here,” said Jericho, looking excited now. “This is going to be our best episode yet!”

Fowler quickly did as he was told, while Jericho spruced himself up for the camera. Percy and Ikaru simply stood aside and watched.

Ten minutes later, the shot was complete, and Jericho wanted to move on. He stood and looked at the trail ahead, and then looked out into the dense forest. “Let's go into the bush, shall we?” he said.

“Not good idea,” countered Ikaru immediately. “We should always stay on the path.”

“C'mon guys, let's just go in a little ways. We don't have to go far, just a short distance,” reasoned Jericho.

“I'll go, man,” intoned Fowler. He was usually game for just about anything.

“Awe, I don't know, Jericho,” said Percy, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his Khaki shorts and kicking at the loose rocks on the path. “Probably wouldn't be a bad idea to stay on the beaten path, guys--ya know?”

“Don't be such a pussy,” said Jericho, looking at Percy with disdain.

“Yeah, Percy,” chimed Fowler, “Nothing's going to happen.”

“It will be dark soon,” injected Ikaru, pointing up at the setting sun.

“We have night-vision,” Jericho argued. “And FLIR” (forward looking infrared,) he added.

“You would be much wiser to stay on the path, and only during daylight hours,” Ikaru said, his voice beginning to take on a more urgent tone.

“Uh--” said Fowler, as he searched his gear bag. “We have the FLIR, but I left the night-vision equipment back at camp.” He looked embarrassed and upset with himself at the same time. “Shit!”

“Great,” Jericho said, truly upset with this news. “We need the night-vision, Ross. We can't go in without it.” Then Jericho looked at Ikaru, “How far is it back to camp?”

“Perhaps three miles. If we leave now, we should arrive back at camp just after dark.”

Jericho began pacing back and forth with his hands on his hips. He really wanted to venture out into the forest itself, but he knew he couldn't do that without night-vision. Though he hadn't mentioned it to anyone, Jericho knew quite a lot about the so-called *Suicide Forest of Aokigahara.* He knew there was likely many undiscovered bodies strewn throughout the forest, and he was actually hoping to discover one; the more decomposed, the better. But he also knew he probably wouldn't find anything lying along the pre-ordained path.

"Let's just head back to camp and come back out in the morning," suggested Percy.

Finally conceding, Jericho said, "All right, let's go back to camp," and began stomping back down the trail like a spurned little boy.

Ikaru sighed with relief, and also started back down the path. Percy and Fowler brought up the rear. A mile from camp, twilight gave way to darkness, and night fell across the land.

"Take out the FLIR, Ross," said Jericho. "We might get lucky."

Fowler removed the infrared camera, powered it up and hit the record button. Holding the device out at arm's length, he began sweeping it back and forth in an exaggerated arc.

"That device pick up body heat?" asked Ikaru.

"Yes," answered Jericho, though the question had not been directed at him. "Body heat registers as bright white. This thing can detect the heat signature of a mouse at two hundred yards."

"Ghosts do not have body heat," countered Ikaru.

"It'll pick up anything that moves, even if it has no body heat...it's just harder to see." Jericho hovered next to Fowler, looking over his shoulder at the small display screen on the FLIR camera.

In the dense forest, on either side of the path, Red-Bellied and Japanese Gray Thrushes sang urgently, then quickly ceased. Percy noticed this first, thanks to his sensitive audio gear. He tapped the headphones, and then took them off to make sure the abrupt silence was genuine. It was. The forest had all of a sudden become deathly silent. Even the insects had stopped their chattering cacophony.

As Fowler swept the FLIR from left to right, he abruptly stopped and held it still.

"What is that, Ross?" asked Jericho, practically crawling onto Fowler's back to better see the screen.

“I dunno, but it's big.”

The small screen on the FLIR camera displayed a large figure perhaps forty yards away. It seemed to hold very still for a short time, then moved a few feet and stood up straight...on two legs.

“What the hell is that thing?” said Jericho, looking half excited and half scared witless.

Ikaru walked up next to Ross to see what they were so excited about. He looked at the screen for only a brief moment, and then smiled, “Asiatic Black Bear, very common to this area.”

“Bear?” echoed Percy. “Is it coming this way?”

“They are not as aggressive as American Black Bears,” Ikaru said. “It will not bother us, unless we bother it.” Then, without missing a beat, he said, “We should continue on, it is almost full-dark.”

“Yeah, let's get back to camp,” said Percy. “I'm getting hungry.”

With a reluctant nod, Jericho started down the path again. “Keep the FLIR going, Ross,” he said.

“Never stopped,” said Fowler, continuing his slow forward progress, while sweeping the FLIR side to side.

They made it back to the vehicles and had camp set up in less than thirty minutes. Fowler made a fire, and Percy began cooking several large cans of beef stew. Ikaru had brought his own food, which consisted of cold rice and dried fish. He was very particular about what he put into his body. Percy's two hundred and eighty pounds, however, showed his lack of discipline, and how much he didn't care about what he put into his body.

They ate and talked about what they would do the next day. Jericho was still bent on going cross-country, and Ikaru still tried to warn him away from it. After seeing that Jericho couldn't be reasoned with, Ikaru stopped trying. The conversation soon became strictly two-way, as Jericho and Fowler started making plans for the following morning.

Percy and Ikaru walked a short distance from the fire and let the other two men do their thing. They stood looking up at the looming silhouette of Mount Fuji.

“This mountain is sacred to the Japanese,” said Ikaru.

“Is that why people come here to die?” asked Percy, his voice trembling.

“Yes...it is,” replied Ikaru, in a matter-of-fact tone.

They stood there in silence for a few more seconds, then Percy said, “I'm gonna get my sleeping bag out of the rig.”

Ikaru nodded, still gazing up at the geological giant.

Percy made his way over to the rear vehicle, using the firelight to illuminate his path. He kept his eyes downcast, making sure not to trip on an errant stick or rock. As he reached the front of the vehicle containing his sleeping bag, he brought his gaze up.

Standing near the back of the rig was a Japanese fellow, perhaps in his early twenties, wearing ragged clothing. He looked disheveled and pale, as though he'd been lost for some time and hadn't eaten for days.

“Hey!” said Percy, more out of surprise than fear. “Who are you, man?”

The unknown person didn't respond, yet kept his eyes fixed firmly on Percy's. Though he wasn't sure, the licking flames from the campfire threw a cast of confusing shadows along the vehicle, Percy thought he saw blood on the man's neck and shirt.

“You lost, dude?” asked Percy, squinting his eyes in an attempt to make out more detail.

The ambiguous young man opened his mouth and said one word: “Tachisaru,” then turned and walked behind the rig.

“Hey, man, where are you going?” shouted Percy, believing the man was up to no-good. He quickly walked to the rear of the vehicle and saw the young man standing there. Now that he was much closer to the stranger, Percy saw that he didn't look right. There was something odd about his appearance. And, indeed there was blood on his neck and upper shirt. Percy could plainly see a large gash in the side of the young man's throat.

Percy's shouts had alerted the other three men, and they were now shouting back, asking him whom he was talking to? Percy responded by yelling, “Someone who got lost up here,” over his shoulder.

The young man opened his mouth again, saying three words this time, “Tachisaru naishi saikoro.”

Percy shook his head, “I don't understand?”

The wounded stranger remained silent. He just stared at Percy with shadowed eyes.

“You better come over to the fire and eat something, dude,” said Percy as he reached out to put a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder.

The instant Percy's hand made contact with the stranger, he instantly burst into thousands of red and black moths, which quickly rose in a thick, fluttering cloud, and then vanished in a wisp of vapor.

Percy had jerked his hand back, and now stood rooted to the spot; his mind trying to process what he had just seen.

He started backing up, shaking his head in protest and muttering, “No way, man—no way,” over and over.

As he took his third backward step, his heel caught on a half-buried rock, and he went tumbling over. He landed squarely on his back, and found himself looking directly up at Jericho, who was leering down at him.

“What the hell are you yelling about, Percy?”

With a speed usually unavailable to Percy, except in extreme conditions, he shot to his feet and looked around wildly, as if frightened.

Just then, Ikaru and Fowler walked up to see what the commotion was all about. “What did you see, Percy-San,” asked Ikaru, looking as if he already knew what the answer would be.

Percy just shook his head and continued to scan the darkness, his eyes darting back and forth.

Nodding his head, Ikaru said, “Konpaku.”

“And what does that mean?” asked Jericho.

“It means,” continued Ikaru, “ghost...he saw a ghost.”

“What makes you so sure?” chimed Fowler.

Before Ikaru could answer, Percy finally found his voice and said suddenly, “It was...a guy,” in a hoarse whisper. “I touched him and he just kinda blew up and turned into a swarm of moths--or butterflies--er something.” He was still shaking head, as if actively trying to deny the truth.

“Then it was not a ghost,” declared Ikaru.

“What was it then?” said Fowler.

“Oni,” said Ikaru, and then corrected himself, “a demon. They use the life force of insects and small creatures to manifest themselves, and usually in the form of someone who died here. But this is only temporary.” He looked at Percy, “When you touched it, Percy, you disrupted the demon's control over the life-force.”

“Get the night-vision gear, Ross,” said Jericho. “We might be able to get some great footage if anything's still hanging around.” He peered into

the darkness, his eyes frantically trying to seek out the paranormal. Jericho wasn't scared at all, but instead was excited and hopeful for further contact.

Ross Fowler retrieved the night-vision goggles for Jericho, and the night-vision camera for himself. As he and Jericho busied themselves with gearing up, Percy began to speak again, “It spoke to me,” he said.

“What did it say?” asked Ikaru, a sense of urgency apparent in his voice.

Percy closed his eyes tightly, was silent for a moment, then opened his eyes and very slowly said, “Tachisaru...naishi...saikoro...I think.”

Ikaru nodded.

“What does it mean?” Percy asked, though he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

Ikarau stared directly into Percy's eyes and said, “Leave or die.”

Jericho happened to be walking by when Ikaru said this. He stopped, gave Ikaru a disbelieving look and said, “The demon-ghost-thing said *leave or die?”* He shook his head and walked away, out into the darkness, chuckling as he donned his night-vision goggles. Fowler was right on his heals.

“Oh, man,” said Percy. “We really shouldn't be here.”

Ikaru didn't hear Percy, he was looking in the direction Jericho and Fowler was walking. “You should stay close to the fire,” he warned.

Jericho waved a dismissive hand at Ikaru, and then continued on, stubbornly unaware of the danger that lurked around him...around all of them. He and Fowler soon disappeared from sight.

“We must go after them,” insisted Ikaru, his usually stern expression turning to one of sincere panic. “It is too dangerous for them to be out there at night.”

“I don't know, man,” replied Percy. He started shaking his head again, and slowly moving toward the fire. “What can we do, anyway?”

“Stop them!” said Ikaru, now tense and beginning to panic in earnest.

Percy just continued to shake his head, moving ever closer to the fire.

Without another word, Ikaru moved off into the pitch black. He began yelling for the two men, but got no response. He searched the darkened landscape for any trace of Jericho and Fowler, but saw nothing at first. Just before he turned away to search in another direction, he caught a glimpse of the greenish hued light of Fowler's night-vision camera as it disappeared into the tree line.

“No!” screamed Ikaru, “come back, you idiots!” He was very concerned for the two men, despite the fact that he disliked them both. But he was, however, unwilling to follow them into the mouth of madness. He knew better than to tempt fate.

He jogged back to the camp, where he found Percy huddled next to the fire, looking very much like a frightened child.

“They have gone into the forest,” said Ikaru, his head bowed.

“They went in?” said Percy, sounding as though he were about to cry.

“We cannot follow them inside the forest,” stated Ikaru, his head still lowered.

“What's gonna happen to them?”

“Nothing good,” said Ikaru.

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All around them, the nocturnal forest creatures squeaked and thrummed. Jericho led the way, with Fowler walking just behind and to the left of him. The forest was dense and brushy, making it difficult to traverse. Jericho almost tripped and fell several times. They were at least a mile in now.

They came to a small, somewhat open area and stopped to rest.

“Keep the camera going, Ross,” said Jericho, his mind still racing with anticipation.

“Ten-four, boss,” Fowler chimed, and continued to rake the forest with his night vision camera.

Jericho sat on a fallen tree and removed his night-vision goggles to wipe the sweat from his brow. When he finished and lowered his arm, he clearly saw a young woman standing a few yards away. She looked pallid, and wore a plain white T-shirt, with blue jeans. She simply stared at Jericho, not offering to speak. “Hey,” said Jericho, then looked over at Ross, motioning for him to look this way. When he turned his gaze forward again, the woman was gone.

Jericho rose to his feet and began walking in the direction he had seen the young woman.

“Where are you going?” questioned Fowler, taking his eye away from the camera to look at Jericho.

“I saw a woman standing over here a minute ago,” said Jericho, as he reached the spot she'd been just moments before. He looked around the

immediate area, threw his hands up in the air and said, “She was here, and I know I saw her.”

Fowler removed the FLIR camera from his backpack, activated it, and started scanning the area. After a few moments of seeing nothing, Fowler replaced the FLIR in his pack and said, “Nothin' out there, boss.”

“She was right here,” Jericho pointed to the patch of moss-covered ground the young woman had occupied just moments ago. “Right here!” he persisted.

“She's gone now, man,” said Fowler, activating the night-vision camera once again.

“C'mon, she must have gone this way.” Jericho began walking at a brisk pace, reattaching his night-vision goggles as he went.

“Crazy bastard,” muttered Fowler, as he followed Jericho deeper into the forest.

***

The campfire was now a roaring pyre thanks to Percy. He had intended to simply build the fire up, but he put far too many logs onto the already substantial fire, causing it to leap outside the pit and begin a series of small grass fires. Percy and Ikaru quickly stamped them out, being careful not to stray too far out of the light.

“Fire is a very dangerous thing,” said Ikaru. “But it can also be used as protection from rogue spirits.”

Percy nodded and scooted in closer to the fire. Every few seconds, he would turn and look behind himself, perhaps thinking that something might sneak up on him at any moment.

“Ikaru looked at his wrist-watch, shook his head, and peered out into the dark surrounding the camp site. “They have been gone for ninety minutes.”

“They'll come back,” said Percy. “Won't they?”

Ikaru didn't answer. Instead, he stood up and began pacing back and forth in a rigid line, keeping his hands clasped in front of his chest, as though praying. After a while, he returned to the fireside and sat on the log next to Percy.

He remained silent for some time, still clutching his hands to his chest. Upon closer scrutiny, Percy saw that Ikaru held a small idol in his

hands. “Buddha?” said Percy, just wanting to break the silence. “I heard about him.”

“Yes, it is he,” Ikaru said, staring into the flickering flames. “He has shown me much wisdom.”

“Like what?” inquired Percy.

Without looking away from the fire, as if transfixed by its allure, Ikaru said, “Keep your soul calm and your mind clear, ready to face that which is revealed by the encroaching darkness.”

“That's really deep, man,” said Percy. “And a little creepy... ya know.”

***

Jericho trudged through the compact foliage, ignoring the thorns that scraped his legs and arms. Fowler followed close behind, constantly panning the camera to and fro. Their path was abruptly cut off with a particularly crowded bunch of trees, so Jericho decided they would temporarily split up; meeting on the other side of the thicket.

“All right, Jericho. Whatever you say, man.”

“See you on the other side,” said Jericho, and then walked off, skirting the edge of the thicket.

As Fowler watched Jericho walk away, he removed a small flashlight from his pocket and shone it into the trees before him. He swept the light to the left, then to the right. When he re-centered the light, so its beam lanced out in front of him, he froze rigid with terror. The flashlight trembled in his quaking hand, making the light dance around the visage of a middle-aged Japanese woman, standing several feet inside the tangle of trees.

“Hello?” said Fowler, hoping to God the woman would answer him, maybe tell him she was lost and needed help.

She did not answer.

“Do you need help?” persisted Fowler, his mind still trying to inject a little normalcy into an otherwise abnormal situation.

Still, she did not answer. Then suddenly, she began moving forward. Not walking, but gliding...right through the trees, and stopped mere inches from Fowler.

He dropped his camera and began mumbling incoherently as he took several quick steps backward. Though he was a seeker of the paranormal, a job that made him a substantial amount of cash, he never actually thought

they'd find a real ghost. Jericho was always blathering on about being the first reality TV show to substantiate the existence of ghosts, but no one took him seriously. They always thought he was just being overly dramatic.

Now that she was close to him, Fowler saw that she wore a traditional flower-print robe; her hair tied neatly in a bun atop her head. Her face seemed to be painted like a Geisha, and she held a tattered book in her pale hands. Her face reflected a grim solemnity, as though she were heart-broken.

Slowly, she opened her mouth and said, “Sewaninaru,” then looked at Fowler expectantly.

“What? I don't understand,” Fowler said, wishing he spoke Japanese.

Again, she said, “Sewaninaru,” which actually means *Help,* though this fact would go unknown to Fowler. Then she added, “Temae beki tachisaru kono ichi,”(you must leave this place.)

Ross Fowler shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, trying to convey that he simply didn't understand what she was trying to tell him.

She seemed to understand this gesture of incomprehension, gave a compendious bow; her head lowered in polite courtesy. When she brought her visage upward again, Fowler's heart did a quick succession of flip-flops in his chest. Her face was now vile and distorted; her mouth open wide and emitting a high-pitched howl that turned fowler's blood into liquid nitrogen in his veins.

Fowler instinctively began quick-stepping backward, his mind alight with terror. He backed into a tree and flattened himself against it. The howling ghost drew ever closer. Just as he decided to turn and run like hell, a branch from just above his head swooped down, curved its stubby end under Fowler's chin, and deftly snapped his neck.

His limp body fell to the forest floor; his head twisted in an unnatural position. In the last fleeting moments of his life, he remembered Ikaru's words about the trees, and how they were filled with an evil energy accumulated from centuries of suicide. He had mocked Ikaru's statement by saying *They're alive.* Little did he know they really were alive--truly alive!

Jericho finally found a section of the trees he could walk through and began doing so. He was almost to the other side, when he caught a glimpse of that same girl he'd seen earlier. She was standing next to a tree one second, then gone the next. Jericho dashed after her.

The forest began to open up a little, the trees less crowded together. To his right, Jericho again saw the girl. This time she stood motionless between two large trees. Jericho yelled, “Hey, you!” and started toward her.

When he got within ten feet of her, she turned and ran behind the tree to her left. Jericho rounded the tree at top speed, and then tripped over something, falling hard to the ground. He hit hard enough to jar the night-vision goggles from his head, landing somewhere on the brushy ground.

“Shit!” he said, as he looked up and found he could no longer see the young woman. He got to his feet, brushed his pants off and turned to locate his four thousand dollar night-vision goggles. As he completed a one hundred and eighty degree turn, he suddenly saw what he had tripped over. It was a dead body.

Upon closer inspection, Jericho recognized the plain white shirt and blue jeans. It was her--the young woman he'd been chasing for the last forty-five minutes. Held tightly to her chest was a book; the cover faded and beginning to rot from exposure to the elements.

Jericho cautiously reached down and pried the book from her decomposing fingers. He removed a tiny LED light from his pants pocket and directed the beam onto the book. The title read, “The Complete Manual of Suicide,” by Wataru Tsurumui.

“What the fuck?” he said. “A book on how to kill yourself?” This was an odd concept to Jericho. His whole life he had thought of suicide as the coward's way out. To the Japanese, however, it was an honorable path. Many Japanese believe that shame is unbearable, and they would rather die than live with that shame and dishonor.

“I gotta get Fowler over here,” thought Jericho. “Get some footage of this corpse.”

He gently replaced the book on the dead body's chest, and turned to yell for Fowler. When he did so, he came face to face with the young woman, or more precisely, her ghost.

Jericho jumped back in response to the close proximity to the pale young woman. He tried to form words through the panic, but only succeeded in producing the first syllable of each word. “Wuh—nnn--” he stammered.

At first, Jericho didn't feel the vines creeping around his ankles. When he did notice, it was too late. With a sickening *rrrrip,* Jericho was

nearly torn in half, from his crotch to his sternum. His screams echoed sharply throughout the forest, then died away in the suffocating foliage.

The vines released him, and he fell to the ground with a wet-sounding *plop,* one leg resting at an impossible angle across his chest. The last thing he saw before he died was the smiling face of the young lady as she stood, or rather, floated above him.

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“What was that?” said Percy, responding to the distant scream he had just heard.

Ikaru jerked his head in the direction the scream emanated from, holding up a hand to silence Percy's questioning pleas.

“That sounded like Jericho, man,” said Percy; sure that he recognized the voice of his boss.

Ikaru waved his hand more frantically, “Listen,” he said.

They both remained silent for a few minutes, straining to hear. No more screams pierced the air. Ikaru got up and took a few steps away from the fire. Percy followed. They slowly edged their way to the parked vehicles, both of them looking around, not focusing on one spot for more than a second or two.

As they turned to walk back to the fire, Percy saw a man standing just outside the circle of light cast by the roaring fire. Percy stopped dead in his tracks. Ikaru saw him just after Percy did, and also stopped cold.

“Is that what I think it is?” said Percy, a pained grimace on his chubby face.

“Yes,” replied Ikaru, keeping his gaze fixed on the apparition. “It is.”

“What do we do?” asked Percy, his panic building to a crescendo.

“We must leave this place—now--right now!” said Ikaru, the consternation in his voice now growing.

“What about Jericho and Fowler,” Percy said. “We can't just leave them here.”

“They are already dead, Percy. I am sorry.”

“How do you know that?” said Percy.

Ikaru looked Percy steadily in the eyes for several long moments, and then said, “Because, anyone who is foolish enough to go into this forest at night, will never come back--not alive, that is.”

Percy stood procrastinating, trying to convince himself that the two men were not dead. That they would walk out of the tree line anytime now. However, when the ghost began moving toward them, Percy and Ikaru jumped into the rear vehicle, turned it around, and sped off down the dirt road.

Ikaru steered the SUV down the winding road, going much faster than he should have been. As they rounded a sharp bend in the dirt road, they saw a line of people standing across the width of the road, shoulder to shoulder. Before logic could override instinct, Ikaru swerved and lost control of the vehicle.

They slid back and forth, from one side of the road to the other, and then crashed head-on into a huge tree. Percy was thrown through the windshield and hit the tree headfirst. The impact shattered his skull, leaving most of his brain scattered on the ground around the tree.

Ikaru slammed into the steering wheel, breaking several ribs and causing substantial internal damage. He was badly injured but would live. As he lay there, bleeding from within and fighting to stay awake, he turned his head to the side and peered through the broken window.

Standing mere feet from the wreckage was the same group of people that had caused him to wreck in the first place, only now Percy stood with them. He looked at Ikaru with a mournful expression, then turned and began walking into the forest, vanishing into thin air along with the rest of the group. Percy was one of them now.

Ikaru's last thought, before slipping into unconsciousness, was the echo of his own words to Percy. "Anyone who is foolish enough to go into this forest at night, will never come back--not alive, that is."

About the Author:

To date, Mr. Wilson has 32 published short stories, mostly in the science fiction and horror genres. He has work available at Amazon.com, Audible.com, as well as Ether Books, Black Label Books, and Another Sky Press to name a few. Mr. Wilson currently spends most of his time caring for his elderly father.

Easy Money

Matthew Wilson

John could see the house from here.

But that didn't mean that he wished to get any closer.

“You sure you want to do this?” Eric asked again, feeling the wind through his guts like his belly button was inside out, open to the elements. Nothing good could come out of this. There could be no happy ending.

The Morton hotel had been famous in its heyday.

Before the murders.

Carl Morton had been a fan of lonely female backpackers. Most had daddy issues, some step-daddies had taken more of an interest in them than their mothers, so they had packed up their troubles and fled in the night.

Carl was cool and understanding. No, they didn't have to pay a cent, business was slow and it would be his pleasure. What kind of human being would he be to let such fine creatures out into the rain?

He killed them while they slept, supplementing his addiction to better his hotel, pawing anything of value they had from rings to grandmother's passed-down necklace to buy another portable color TV for room C3.

He liked to make the place look nice, with all the easy comforts of home.

The police traced him through the initialized bracelets whose names he forgot to scratch off. He hanged himself in his basement before the law had a chance to take him out in handcuffs. His body was cremated later that week with little ceremony and the town tried to settle, ignore the noise of retreating news reporters chasing fresher stories.

Until the murders.

There had been talk of razing the Morton hotel to the ground a while now, the police forensic team had ripped up every floorboard and driven a bulldozer through the cement floor in the garage in their pursuit of additional bodies.

Nothing had been put back when they had finished, the hotel was open to the wind like an ugly wound. At first creatures made use of it, collecting within the damp rooms to fend off pneumonia.

When the animals started dying, the others stayed away. Death emanated from every window, the grass turned yellow around the outer edges of the porch and dead ivy peeled off the wall like skin off a leper victim.

No one came here.

Not till James needed the money.

“I stay here till midnight and you guys give me a grand, right?”

Eric and Martin looked at each other. They had been slaving in the same office of their bank branch for three years now. Their pranks had evolved from whoopie cushions to horse tranquilizers in the coffee.

Now they wanted bigger thrills, something they could put on YouTube and five star that shit.

They wanted someone to go into the Morton hotel.

Eric checked his watch, angled it toward the silver dollar moonlight pouring through the tops of the trees. It was a minute shy of ten o'clock. No one- not even kings and queens made a grand in two hours, James reasoned and it gave him courage. Five hundred dollars an hour.

His daughter had a cold, she needed her medicine. It was either this or rob the bank itself, and he would be no good to his girl rotting behind bars.

You'll be no good to her dead either.

For crying out loud. There's no such things as ghosts.

If he said it enough times then maybe, just maybe he would believe it.

For yet it had failed completely. A bird screamed in the trees as it broke a rat's back and fed on the remains leaking out the side of its neck.

“I'm not too sure I like this place.” James noted.

Eric felt some small compassion and handed him a flashlight, he felt if their roles were reversed he wouldn't like to be trapped in the dark either. “Then don't take all night, I'm freezing my nips off out here.” James looked from one to the other, his voice a fraction higher like he'd stubbed his toe. “You guys aren't coming in?”

Eric would have laughed but the sound had no home here in the dark.

“You kidding? I wouldn't go in there for a million.”

Martin counted five one hundred dollar bills in his hand and set up his hand held camcorder as soon as Eric snatched it from the air. “Yeah, we're getting this deal cheap. You're gonna make me a film star, pal. I always wanted to be a horror director, remember to say something witty before old man Morton rips your eyes out.”

Eric held up a money filled fist, he didn't mind going into an old abandoned building- where there were absolutely no ghosts. But he was not going to put up with their shit scare tactics for twice the money.

“Half now, half later.” Martin smiled, “If there's a later.”

“You guys are great.” James lied and turned his back on them, starting through the trees, toward the hotel on the hill.

Eric and Martin watched him a while, then Eric wiped his nose on his sleeve, in defiance to the cold. “You get the other stuff?”

“You calling me irresponsible?” Martin put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the small revolver. He snapped open the silver plated cylinder. It was fully loaded. Six shots, more then he would need.

“All right, let's do this thing.” He said, pressed record on the camcorder.

And slowly crept after James.

***

The front door of the hotel was open.

“Where is he? You see him?”

Eric shook his head and noted it didn't matter, they had hung back in the trees, hanging back. James had had more than enough time to break in through one of the many mangled windows and make something of a camp for himself. It was not the dark side of the moon. It didn't take a genius to sit down on your ass for two hours.

Easy money.

Eric opened his bag and pulled out the wig, the mascara made his eyes bulge and the fangs made him look like a demented beaver.

“You think this shit will make him fail the bet?”

Martin straightened his makeup. “You kiddin'? One look at you and he'll jump out the window like the damn place is on fire.”

The night was cold and Eric had insisted James use a mini heater rather than use the broken staircase inside to build something of a camp fire. Sure the place deserved to be burned from the earth like all evil in the world.

But surely not when you are still inside of it.

“Why do think he didn't use the window?” Eric thought aloud, but Martin didn't care. He was in director mode. He thrust the camera in front of

him, when James saw Eric in the maniac makeup he would totally freak and never mind the grand he was supposed to give away.

He'd make a fortune selling the video as James fell out the window to a local news station for a cheap laugh at the end of the show for a few grand. Maybe double numbers.

“Action.” Martin said and pushed open the door.

Up on the chimney, pigeons took offence and flight. They speared the moon light in two like cut paper and retreated to the tree line. The roof had long ago fallen into disrepair and through the master bedroom where the TV antenna currently rested in the first floor corridor.

Martin blinked when the door stopped, bounced back at him like a struck spring. Some rubble or debris must have fallen behind the door over the years. Maybe James had used a window after all.

But it was neither of those things.

It was a woman.

***

“Leave you're mouths open and you're likely to catch something eventually." the woman smiled and opened the door wider. It had struck the back of her leg but she seemed a good sport and welcomed them inside.

She was a beautiful creature and Martin felt it would offend her to keep filming. She might think him a pervert and when he saw her cat green eyes he didn't wish to throw over that appearance at all.

Her skin was dark as wet sand and her mouth two virginial mounds of cherry flavored lip stick.

“Forgive my friend and I. We're looking for another... has- has a man been here?”

The woman turned and showed even white teeth. “Oh, you mean the blonde guy?”

Martin remembered how to breath, he'd felt zoned for a moment, so many stories of this place his superstition wouldn't be surprised if James had turned into this beautiful woman as soon as he had stepped over the entrance way.

“Yes. Is he here?”

“I only saw a glance, he was heading upstairs. I just come here to get out of the coming rain. I have nowhere else to go and when I found this

empty house I thought *jackpot*. You know. It's better then freezing on the streets. I'm a tramp but I'm proud. A girl needs somewhere to put her sleeping bag. Once a week I go into the town to get supplies, but until I find my feet I gotta take what I can. I'd rather have a wooden roof than starlight."

She can't have heard the stories, Eric theorized. There would be no way a woman like this or any would stay here overnight and more if they had.

He stepped around her and saw a half-empty tin of cold baked beans on the sleeping bag on the floor. The great hearth in the side of the building had once illuminated fabulous parties Morton held to bring in the new year.

Now it was a dried-up pit full of dead rats. The woman must have dragged the soiled carpet across the room and into it to start a fire and warm her bones. Spent matches lay everywhere like confetti at a wedding, but it must have been a wash out. The place was too damp.

Nothing could live here, let alone burn.

Eric started walking toward the next room. The east stairs were broken, but if James could climb up there like a damn mountain goat then so could he. He smiled and put his fingers to his lips. "If he's upstairs we can still get him-"

"Eric."

"Hang on, Martin. I got to-"

"Eric."

The woman said she had some tepid lemonade if they were interested, excited to have guests she skipped back to her rags and rooted round inside for the soda bottle.

Eric didn't like Martin's face at the best of times, but thought it more then unattractive when completely drained of blood. Concerned by the worry he saw there, Eric jogged over and leaned in like he had bad eye sight trying to read small script.

"What's up?"

Martin nodded forward. "Look at her hand."

"Yeah, nice. I like her right tit, it's bigger then her left and-"

"No you idiot, look. She lives here in a dump like this and wears clothes from the garbage."

Eric shrugged. "So?"

"So why's she got all that money in her hand, gotta be at least

five hundred dollars."
Eric blinked. Waited.

There was no follow up statement. No finale to the joke.

“I don't get it.” He said, hoping he would move onto knock knock gags of which he was master.

“James is not the kind of person to loan a stranger five hundred dollars. Excuse me, miss?”

“Wait, man. You'll offend her. You can't call someone that hot a thief without getting her number.”

“Miss?”

The woman turned, a bottle of soda in one hand. “Yes?”

“Where did you say our friend was?”

The woman laughed as if she was a silly child who had eaten the last biscuit in the tin. She didn't mean it, she had made a mistake. She walked toward them and offered Martin the bottle first. “Oh, he went to the bathroom up on-”

All his life, Martin had been a joker. To see for himself, Eric looked at her hand.

He saw no money as it was tucked behind her back.

When she pulled it away there was no money in her fist.

Just the axe.

***

“Wait!” Martin screamed. The axe sailed through the hair, removed the first three hairs of Eric's fringe and chopped into Martin's neck. It stuck behind his voice box like a running chain saw halfway through the trunk of an oak.

His hand had been going for his belt. For the gun.

Now it twitched like he was conducting an orchestra, fingers tapping the air like a writer's keyboard as his digits received the dying electrical signals of his brain telling him to run, to get away without realizing it was too late.

Everything went dark, then completely away as he sank to his knees, then flopped face first in embers of the long dead hearth.

“Give me your money! I'll be poor no more!” The girl screamed, yanking at the axe, it finally came free, hosing the rising damp soaked wall with blood. It bubbled briefly then slid down like hail down a window.

The force of the yank knocked the head of the weapon back and the flat edge caught Eric against the eyebrow, it split open to the glistening bone beneath and he howled, dropping, shaking the blood from his eye when she saw the woman stand over him.

Raise the axe.

“Whoa!” He rolled onto his left side as the axe ripped into the wood where he had lain.

“Do you know how long your body aches when it knows no warmth?” The woman wailed. “I've been cold on the streets so long, can't even light a fucking fire. But your money will give me another chance at life. Things will be like they were once before. The other guy had money, you must too. Give it to me! Give me your money!”

Eric looked at Martin's body several feet away, the crack of the axe against his face had knocked him quite some distance away.

He thought of the gun they had planned to fire in the ceiling.

A tool to frighten James from Martin's army days.

It had only been a joke, meant to hurt no one but their pride.

A bit of fun. Now the fun was over.

The woman raised the axe over her head and froze.

Straightened.

Eric lowered his hands guarding his face like a firework had gone off unexpectedly. The axe fell without direction, splintering still quivering into the floor boards just under his crotch. There was no power behind it, she seemed to have dropped it.

Then the blood came out of her nose and the knife came out of her chest.

“How wonderful.” Someone said.

Eric watched as the knife was pulled up and the woman went up with it, completely off her feet like a kite in the wind. Her mouth was open in an “O” but no words escaped it. Her lips trembled in effort but blood was falling to the floor like paint off a freshly decorated car. Not all the paint hit the floor. Some splashed against an invisible object behind the woman.

A boot.

Blood red boots.

Trousers.

An erection.

A hand touched the dead woman's stomach, scooped up some blood and wiped it on his face.

Eric had seen the old crime scene photos.

“Morton?”

The girl spasmed once as the knife recoiled like a serpent's fangs back into its mouth.

“Don't you know it's not nice to break into people's houses?” Old man Morton's red mask smiled as he saw the man lying on the floor, twirled the knife, and walked toward him.

About the Author:

Matthew Wilson, 29, is a UK resident who has been writing since he was very small, and recently these stories have escaped into Static Movement, Pill Hill Press and Bank Heavy Press.

Dead On His Feet

Matthew Wilson

It was no good.

Eric could still hear the damn noise no matter how many times he tried to close his eyes and get to sleep. He had an English test in the morning and no time for rats.

Earlier in the week, mom had lain down traps, unwilling to stand and face the things. Despite Dad walking out with all the money she still bought something to rid herself of more pests. It was up to Eric to bag and bin them once their necks were broke.

Thanks, mom. Just what I wanted!

Right now he wanted sleep and his pity for rats was gone. Let mom break their necks and foxes drag their bodies from the bins at dawn.

Bump, bump, bump.

Frustrated, he kicked off his sweat sodden sheets and headed to the door, too worked up to worry about the bogeyman beneath his bed.

But mom was more of a problem. Tomorrow all he had to look forward to was bad grades and maybe detention. Mom had to go to work. She'd be pissed if he woke her, caught his toe in the hallway and screamed. How was she supposed to put food on the table when he was making a nuisance of himself? She was pleased he was no longer scared of the dark... but this was ridiculous.

Rats can't hurt you, son.

Well why don't you go up there then?

Screw that!

Why was she not woken by the noise? Normally the moment she could hear him stalling brushing his teeth in the bathroom she'd yell up stairs he'd get no cocoa later. It wasn't fair.

Eric winced as something dragged along the ceiling like a trap had snapped across a rat's back and it was still alive, one mean bastard dragging itself toward its hole. Eric gave the scenario more thought and headed to his toy cupboard. Before his father had left he liked to play baseball with him out in the backyard.

Ah-ha.

Eric picked up the short stick and took a practice swing. He hoped mom didn't tap him on the shoulder in the dark, with this and his nerves he could take her head off in one neat swing.

Now where was his pen torch?

"All right, I'm coming." He smiled and started creeping toward the landing. He was too small to reach the dangling cord in the ceiling. The trap door to the attic. When he was even smaller then he was now mom would hide his Christmas presents up here and he'd have to drag his toy chest here to use as a step ladder. Even then he had to jump like a kitten enchanted by the slither of string.

It would do him no good now though, would make far too much noise. He figured rightly he would rather face a hoard of rats rather than mom without her makeup. He'd heard her giggle to friends at tea that last thing at night she slapped her face with anti-wrinkle cream and cucumber slices over her eyes like a damn salad.

That was not a pretty picture he wished to see with his own eyes. He realized he was good and scared enough. To beat away and the dark and some of his fears he took another swing and another. Yes, he had power now. No one had better mess with him, he was king of the rodents and-

Whack!

He winced when his squinting eyes misjudged the distance and smashed a hole in the wall, missing the light switch and possible electrocution by an inch.

You can't blame that on the rats, he thought dumbly, wishing that he had stayed in bed. But he had to get some sleep. Let mom tan his hide tomorrow, so long as he was well rested to meet it.

Let me have tonight and I'll face the music tomorrow.

He felt dead on his feet and wondered when mom would let him drink this wonderful brew adults called coffee. The sooner he got this over with the sooner he could renew dreams of the coming soccer season. In the real world he was quite useless and liable to fall over his laces. But in his dreams he was a star, flying from corner to goal post with the speed of sound.

He wished to be saved from the tedium of reality as soon as possible, where he was nothing. Where rats seemed to have bigger brains than him in getting up to the attic without an escalator.

He tensed his toes, tucked the bat under his arm and jumped.

"Damn." He hissed, looked back down the corridor, adjacent to the crater in the wall, expecting the door opposite to open and mom covered in green goo and cucumber coming at him like the walking dead.

Again he favored the rat. At least with that he could take a swing at it and expect its annihilation. After the divorce, mom seemed invincible. After she set fire to dad's car she certainly not someone that he wished to mess with.

He ground his teeth till he heard one crack and tried again. His finger tips caught it, found purchase. Then the ladder in the ceiling rolled down and he had to catch it before it hit the floor like a meteorite.

Thumpf.

He felt blood well in his palms, shit, he'd done some damage to himself which he didn't trust to look at in the moonlight without screaming. He wiped his hand on his sleeve and with shaking hands, pulled the out torch he'd gotten free with his last burger promotion down at the fast food store.

It had a shorter battery life then a lonely woman's vibrator but he doubted it would take long to crack the vermin's skull. He snapped the light on, trying to swallow and look away from his hand.

He concentrated on the dust like a dead mummy had come here before him, falling to pieces bit by bit.

No, he would not think of dead mummies. He might start getting ideas. Fantasies were what made his days shine better after all.

Mom had not cleaned up here. Had told him he must never come up here, he thought it was because of rats. A rare show of concern for him that he might catch some dangerous disease by playing in their kingdom, or maybe she feared he would pass it onto her.

But now he was here in the dark he knew it was because something had died up here. It certainly smelled like it.

The attic was filled with old horror comics he made sure to keep the sweeping beam of torch light from, he had enough active imagination working against him thank you very much.

Rats are ugly things, but at least easier to put in a bag than werewolves. "Wow!" He jumped, knocked a box of dust over that had once contained family photos, disintegrated through the years when he saw the woman watching him.

Though mom paid the rent he felt a great need to apologize, to not offend this ghoul who owned this kingdom.

Great, our house is freaking haunted.

But it was no ghost. He wondered why she was wearing a dress and when the moon came out from behind the distant grumbling clouds saw it was only his mother's wedding dress hung out on the broken remains of a mannequin. The cigarette stains on the edges had been moms efforts in burning it to rid herself of bad memories before reconsidering, maybe she could save some of the fabric for washing the dishes.

With her thyroid problem she would never wear it again.

Jeez. Mom was this... thin?

It amazed him, as much as he'd thought that ghosts were real. Bloody idiot. Maybe all the things that mom said about him was right. That dad was better off not to have a disappointment as him for a son.

"All right, genius. No more fun and games." He arced the light around him like he was following the flight path of a blue bottle fly. "Where are you? Come on out so I can brain ya and get back to bed."

Click.

He knew what it was before he fully turned round.

The trap door had closed.

Locked.

With him inside.

***

Impossible.

Mom called him a mess, but she didn't hate him enough to lock him up in here for punishment. She wouldn't waste the opportunity of eating him up and spitting him out. The trap door could not close on its own. A tornado might rip it from the foundations of the house but the ladder was in the way and had to be pushed completely up before it snapped shut.

Never mind locking it.

It had to be done manually.

Someone had locked him in.

"Mom?"

He stepped forward and stopped when he saw the dead rat on the floor. It had no mouse trap caught around its back severing its spine.

It had a bite mark like someone had taken a large chunk out of it.

Eric felt his guts fall through a trap door, down into his intestines.

"Mom?" He said louder, not caring if he woke her. If she was trying to teach him a lesson, then he had learned it. Just open up. Let him down and back into the light. He would do what she said. He would be a good boy.

"Hello, Eric."

"Fuck me!" The light went off as Eric dropped it. He saw a face, a smile, and then there was only darkness. He dropped to his knees feeling something fly over his head, connecting impotently with the space he had just occupied.

Where was it? He had dropped the torch. He remembered what his mom said.

He could do nothing right.

No wonder dad left.

"Eric."

His hands clamped round the small instrument and snapped it on. When he swung it to the form it still had a smile. And a hole in his throat.

"My boy, mother said you mustn't come here."

Eric felt his stomach hurt like a live maggot was trying to eat its way out of him.

"Dad? Mom said you ran away."

Eric saw the hole was not bleeding, when the thing looked at him and shook his head, Eric could see the hole extended from ear to ear. Dad's throat had been slit from one side to another.

"Mommy says a lot of things." The thing that had been his father said with light in his eyes, relieved to see his boy despite the warnings. "She told me to stay away from other ladies." He shrugged and a piece of him fell to the floor. "I didn't listen. Am I so hideous?"

"Jesus, dad. You don't look too well."

Again he shrugged, and lost a finger. "The cow didn't even have the guts to face me, she had to kill me while I slept... No matter. I never did learn my lessons from that woman. Just because I am dead does not mean I don't feel. And I am pissed, my boy. You are my only chance."

Eric watched as his father floated through the comic boxes and came at him like a sheet blown off a washing line in a gale. He stopped some distance away to let him know he didn't want to hurt him.

"What do you mean?"

Dad smiled and Eric was pleased. "Listen to me carefully, son. There's something I want you to do, daddy needs you to be brave."

***

Click.

Late in the night, the boy went downstairs, toward the kitchen where he fixed himself a sandwich. He was tired with no more fear for the dark, his eyes were used to the absence of light now and he didn't even have to open the fridge to illuminate the room like a nightlight.

What was he doing?

His stomach gurgled, demanded food and he satisfied it.

Oh yes, that was right.

He rubbed his eyes and found he was tired.

What was he doing?

Oh yeah. He yawned and headed out the kitchen toward the stairs. Up he went with no fear of mom asleep in her bedroom. It would be good to get some sleep, to head to school tomorrow and do his best as dad insisted he try for him and get an A plus.

When he was outside his door he looked at the jam covered knife he held in his hand he had made with the sandwich.

What was he doing?

Oh, yeah.

He headed into mom's room, raised the knife above her sleeping head.

And bought it down.

It was not the cut dad asked for, but it was good enough for the job.

Eric hoped for once his old man was not disappointed.

About the Author:

Matthew Wilson, 29, is a UK resident who has been writing since he was very small, and recently these stories have escaped into Static Movement, Pill Hill Press and Bank Heavy Press.

Skeleton in the Wall

Matthew Wilson

The coin was caught between the gaps in the wall when I dropped it.

I turned my head, cheeks squished against the cold rising damp crust of the wall and forced my hand through the mouse hole. I grimaced as I found rat feces and splodges of half digested chewing gum. I had to find it, the last of my pocket money and soon the ice cream man would come round. Bells tingling a merry tune.

I had done worse for money than getting muck on my hands. I nearly had it, felt the raised inscription of In God We Trust on my muddy finger tips. And then the hand grabbed my arm.

That's a big rat, I thought.

Her fingernails punctured my flesh and I screamed once before passing out.

***

Mother was washing up when I told her the girl had tried to rip my damn arm off.

She said she wished I would not make up such stories. Hoped I took more care when falling out of trees. She had warned me- hadn't she warned me time and time again about climbing that front garden oak? She'd just bought me a new computer console through scrubbing hospital floors. Why couldn't I be like other children and tear a zombie's head off on it?

Dismayed by her continued disconnection to my problems I went back to the mouse hole in the wall. My left arm bandaged to the elbow, a flashlight in my right hand.

I laid it down before the dark hole and took a breath- wait- I headed back to the kitchen. Mom was getting on with the dinner, trying to shove a dodo-sized turkey into a dog kennel sized cooker for the coming party. Tonight was New Years Eve and I was the bottom of Mom's list of things to pay attention to. As usual.

She did not look up as I got the butcher knife and headed back into the living room. Better safe then sorry if it was a rodent.

"I got something now."

I stopped.

Where the hell was the flashlight?

"Ah, very funny." I moaned and lay down, peered into the hole and screamed as a bright, brilliant light filled my vision like a train in a tunnel. Something laughed behind the dry rot and turned the beam off. When the red dots before my eyes burned away I checked my watch with a nasty burning sensation and saw Mom had thirty minutes till the party.

More than enough time to perform an exorcism.

I stabbed the hole, hoping to be rewarded with a satisfying yelp. "Come out of there- hey!"

She had my arm again. This time there was no pain, just a seizure of my being as I saw a narrow vein line crack materialize in the wall move up along toward the heavy China display case beside the drooping curtains Mom had not moved despite her feng sui favoritism as she'd put her back out last time.

The massive brown thing wobbled, righted. Fell, with me in its path.

"Let me go, let me go." I bellowed to the hole and suddenly I was free, rolled over as the cabinet case heavy as a baby elephant smashed into the floor, ripping the boards up like a meteorite had hit the ground. The TV flicked off from its tedious pop songs and I tensed, waiting for Mom to explode.

But there was nothing, no demand of what I was doing and that undoubtedly I was doing it on purpose tonight of all nights to make her look foolish in front of coming friends. More scared by her silence than the mess around me I ventured into the kitchen and for a moment thought she might have sneaked out for more additional herbs to compliment the meal.

But after some exploration I found she was there all right.

The turkey on the floor, her head in the oven.

Though the gas was not turned on, the knife in her neck made me quite sure that she was dead.

Again that awful laughing behind the walls assaulted me.

I knew I was alone in the house with a killer.

***

When I was very small, Mom would scare me. Tell me about the girl in the wall who would come late at night to the bed of every bad boy and take them away. Within the walls. No. I decided I would be good. I would remain in the light. On this side of the wall away from the dust and asbestos insulin.

I would be good.

But now that was all gone and I would be blamed. Mom had not believed in ghosts and what right-minded person did? Only the good and they deserved to be in the light.

The front door bell drilled like a fire alarm. Damn. The guests were early. They couldn't come in, not right now. They just couldn't. Still the walls laughed.

"Shut it, you." I said but it took no notice.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

They would blame me. Even the fire when the microwave plugged into the wall bubbled, fizzed. Then erupted like a dying star.

I didn't do it. I really didn't.

***

Four walls surround me now. Padded.

But I am still good. Momma's good little boy.

I was right all along you know. When the house burned to the ground they found the skeleton in the wall. My younger sister. Mom always argued with her and there had been theories she'd run off. Into the sunset where no doubt she was happier than I ever could be under Mom's shadow.

She'd argued with me on the last night she breathed too. But I didn't kill her.

I know it was her who cut my flesh, opened my arms to the bone when I invaded her space, so now, doctors have to wrap me up in this damn jacket. I do not like it here. I want to go home.

There is something in the walls, watching me.

Maybe if I am good it will leave me alone.

About the Author:

Matthew Wilson, 29, is a UK resident who likes to write during the witching hour, tempting out the ghouls and ghosts for details on their killing games.

The Barn Lovers

Olivia Arieti

Tornwell Hall, the estate Miranda had inherited from her uncle, Sir George, a distant descendant of its first owner, Earl Richard Tornwell, was lost and forlorn in the most hostile part of the British countryside. The place was surrounded by a thick row of trees beyond which stretched rough moors with hardly any vegetation, stony paths and unfriendly slopes. The wind always howled and the sun definitely preferred more gentle areas. The moon only lingered silently and cast its ghastly light on the dreadful scenery, an open invitation for all ghosts, goblins and ghouls of the area to gather and accomplish their mischievous and eeriest deeds.

The mansion appeared gloomy at first sight, a majestic structure with a high turret that stood like a lugubrious menace against the sky. The rooms were huge, with dark and ancient furniture; the windows, all draped with heavy velvet curtains, certainly had never permitted the light to enter.

The new owner, who had already spent a few weeks there during her uncle's illness, the sufficient time to be so unfavourably impressed, resolved to sell the property as soon as possible and immediately set forth to Tornwell Hall.

Miranda was greeted by Agnes, the housekeeper, an austere old woman with a hostile look. Probably, she considered her new mistress an intruder in a place where almost no one ever dared to venture.

As a matter of fact, many were the stories about the hall, all terrifying and rather gruesome.

Even if Agnes was most reserved and hardly ever spoke, Miranda was glad not to be alone in that creepy house.

The young woman's room was huge and gloomy with a big wooden bed so high that she almost had to climb on it. There was also a big window that was accurately kept shut; the wind seemed to have fun blowing through it and made the curtains stir as if moved by mysterious hands.

It was early autumn and the secular trees surrounding the mansion had golden foliage with red and brown touches that conferred a baroque frame to the whole structure, a strong contrast with its hovering gloominess.

Unfortunately, the procedure for the sale required more time than expected.

Since spending the whole day in her new dreary house was quite unpleasant, Miranda entered the habit of taking long walks or went horse riding.

The hills and moors, despite their harsh wilderness, offered a suggestive and poignant view and somehow the young lady couldn't avoid feeling safer as she got more and more distant from the mansion.

On one of those pleasant afternoons when the weather was still clement and unexpectedly the sun conceded to spare some of its last feeble rays, the young woman was relishing her walk so much that she didn't realise it was almost dusk. The sky darkened quite suddenly as it happens when days become shorter and a chilly wind began to blow. Afraid of losing her way on the unfamiliar paths, she hastened home.

As Miranda approached the barn, she sighted a dark figure riding a black horse. The man, tall and cladded in a hooded cloak, somehow had a phantom-like appearance. She couldn't get a glimpse of his face not even when he got off the horse and looked inside. Certainly irritated or disappointed, he stamped his foot before jumping back on his saddle and quickly vanished in the dark.

After dinner, Miranda told Agnes about the mysterious rider but the woman shook her head and replied she knew nothing about him. Then she wrapped her shawl tight around her shoulders and bid the new mistress goodnight.

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The following day was spent in the library with the hope of finding some old manuscript, book, or, with a bit of luck, even a diary, which could reveal something about the history of the house and its noble inhabitants. Unfortunately, all research was in vain.

Quite annoyed, Miranda resolved to go back to the barn; her strange and presumably distant neighbour might come along again.

The structure was old and deteriorated, almost on the point of falling down. A feeble light penetrated through the cracks in the roof shedding a ghastly shimmer in the big room; the hoots of the numerous owls that had

entered through the appropriate holes, contributed to make the place extremely sinister and spooky.

As the woman went in, a girl appeared apparently from nowhere and rushed towards her.

Miranda stepped back frightened by the unexpected encounter as the youth shouted angrily, “You’ll never take him away from me, Richard is mine,” and added with vehemence, “Better keep that in mind, Lady, for your own good.”

“Who are you, Miss?”

“Who am I?” replied the girl and burst in a loud coarse laughter.

Then she ran out of the barn and just as the unknown fellow, disappeared in the darkness that by now had enwrapped the structure and all its surroundings.

The girl must have been very young and despite the angry look, her delicate features betrayed a sweet and unripe innocence that made her as lovely as a budding spring flower. The garments were old fashioned and suggested those of a maid servant. Her white skirt was strangely stained with blood.

Once again Miranda questioned Agnes about those dark creatures and once again the housekeeper denied having ever heard of them. Furthermore, this time she looked at her mistress sneeringly as if her questions were motivated by weird or insane fantasies.

***

By now Miranda had become restless. Something strange was going on and there was no way of finding out what it was. Moreover, at night suffocated moans were heard followed by coarse laughter that often resounded louder and louder. Even if the shutters were accurately fastened, the wind somehow managed to enter stirring the curtains lugubriously.

Some invisible presence was certainly wandering in her room; that awareness made her blood run cold.

One late evening, while she was desperately attempting to fall asleep, a sudden sound of hooves caused her to jump up. She rushed to the window, drew the heavy curtains and opened the shutters just in time to see the mysterious rider dash by.

Surely, he was heading to the barn. If Miranda wanted to find out what was going on, she had to run there too.

The young woman slowly pushed the half open door and hurriedly hid behind a huge stack of hay. Her suspects proved right, the fellow was there and much to her surprise, also the maid servant.

The man took off his cloak, rushed over to the girl and held her in his arms as if he'd never let her go. Then, prey of lustful delirium, he pushed her on a bed of straw, tore open her blouse and started kissing her throbbing breast. The girl clung to him as if afraid he would disappear, even when he pulled off her skirt and dropped on her little body shivering with desire. As their embrace grew wilder, heart-rending yet terrifying cries resounded in the pitch-black night.

Miranda was breathless; certainly the lovers were doomed to hide their deep passion for some unknown reason. She was about to leave when she saw the man trying to free himself from the little clammy hands that grasped at his body; with the saddest cry, he rose up and put on his cloak.

This time it was her scream which resounded loudly on realising that the cloak cladded a horrifying skeleton instead of a body and the hood covered a macabre skull with hollow sockets and frightful jaws.

Faster than lightning the fellow jumped on his horse and dashed away.

As Miranda turned round, she noticed that the girl had disappeared.

The young woman stood paralysed with fright. She had just seen two paranormal creatures that belonged to a world that wasn't her own.

As soon as she recovered, she ran back home, rushed into her room and locked the door in case the ghastly lovers should arrive.

***

The new owner of the estate was now determined to find out the truth. Agnes was certainly hiding something. Surprisingly, the old housekeeper was terrified as well; she, too, had heard the hooves and screams.

Without being asked, the woman began telling about the strange events that had occurred when Earl Richard entered the mansion with his family.

Her reticence was caused by an insurmountable fear; it was whispered that the more the ghoulish facts were recalled, the more the horrifying curse

would doom the hall.

To settle family affairs, the noble man had been obliged to marry Martha, the daughter of his bankrupted father's wealthy cousin. The young earl had never been able to love his wife, a very greedy and jealous woman.

When Richard saw the sweet and beautiful maid servant, he fell in love at once.

Of course, their affair had to be kept hidden and the couple secretly met mainly in the barn.

Unfortunately, the girl became pregnant and somehow the earl's perfidious wife found out.

One morning the servant's lifeless body was discovered in a pool of blood in her own bed. Nobody could explain what had happened to her.

She was buried hurriedly in the village little cemetery accompanied by Richard's deepest grief and by Martha's greatest satisfaction.

The poor earl was heart-broken and soon went mad; he started galloping across the country night and day till exhausted, he fell and broke his neck.

Since then the two lovers have been reunited and their ghosts kept meeting in the barn; the girl, however, was still fearful that the mistress of the mansion could somehow take her husband back.

One night while Martha was sleeping, she entered her room and stabbed her.

Nobody could explain her death either, but rumours spread very quickly for everyone was sure that the ghost of the beautiful servant was still roaming around.

From then on it was said that no lady would ever find peace or be safe there. As a matter of fact, other women had died in rather mysterious circumstances; their bodies were always found in a pool of blood.

"Fortunately your uncle was unmarried", Agnes remarked.

"So the house is haunted?" asked Miranda uneasy.

"Some folk believe in ghosts, others don't," the old woman replied dryly.

Without another word, as if regretting having revealed so much, she abruptly left the room.

***

That evening Miranda retired early. She determined to leave the following morning. All those stories were too disturbing especially after what she had witnessed herself.

She had just shut the door when the maid servant ghost appeared.

“So you were spying on us, just as you did before murdering me” the girl shouted furiously.

“Wait” replied Miranda doubtful if she was already dreaming, “I have nothing to do neither with you nor with your Richard.”

“You are the bloody mistress of the house, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but-” mumbled the woman.

“I bet you want him back,” she sneered, “but I won’t let you” and with a hideous glare took out from under her apron, a hooked iron bar.

“Now you shall die just like I did with the help of the same servants that helped you” and continued full of rage, “I’ll do exactly what you did to me that night on the kitchen table, fearful I’d give birth to a bastard heir.”

She hadn’t finished talking that three other ghost servants appeared.

The wind was howling furiously and thunders could be heard in the distance. A heavy rain was already hitting the panes and the huge room suddenly became freezing cold.

Miranda, seized with terror, was about to run but two ghosts had already got hold of her and dragged her on the bed while the third pulled up her skirt, ripped off her panties and opened her legs keeping them in that position so that the maid servant laughing perversely, could shove in the hooked iron bar.

A morbid look appeared on the ghastly faces as they watched the horrible deed.

When she had finished her lethal job, all ghosts began laughing wildly and suddenly disappeared leaving the poor Miranda in a pool of blood.

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It is said that the property is still on sale for no buyer after learning about the horrid events that occurred to its previous owners, ever dared to make an offer for such a ghastly mansion.

About the author:

This US citizen and former high School English teacher lives in Italy with her family. Her plays and poems have been published both in the USA and UK. Her short stories appeared in The Smoking Poet, Enchanted Conversations, Daily Bites Of Flesh 2011 Pill Hill Press, Voices From The Garage, Riverbabble, Halloween Anthology Magic Cat Press, Christmas Warmth Anthology Xoxo Publishing, Medieval Nightmares Anthology Static Movement. Her horror stories have been recently accepted by other Static Movement anthologies.

The Old Haunted Church

Jason Ryan Qualls

We live just a few blocks from an ugly and very dirty old church. Behind the church is nothing but endless woods and a few old tombstones.

People who have lived here for many years have been telling a chilling story about that old church. Several decades ago, a group of young girls were walking down a lonely street late one evening, when they came upon a man in a clown costume. The man led the young girls into that old church one Halloween night, With the promise of having yummy candy, waiting for them inside. After tricking and trapping them inside, he tied the girls up, and mutilated and molested them. And then he killed them one by one. Then he wrote in the little girls blood the words on a wall

"DEAD GIRLS DON'T SAY NO."

The next day was a Sunday, and the priest walked in to discover the horrible sight of what had happened the night before. After searching for a mysterious dripping sound in the darkness. He found a pool of blood that a stray cat was licking at. The dripping came from the bloody stumps of several headless and nude, mutilated young girls. Who's bodies were hung upside down impaled on inverted black crosses from the wooden rafters above.

Till this day no one knows who did it and no suspects have ever been found. Just a few weeks later, after the girls remains had been buried, a package was delivered to each of the murdered girls homes. And when their parents went to open the boxes, Their screams could not withstand their ghastly horror. In each of the boxes their contained one of the girl's badly decomposed severed head. It is said that the four little girls were buried in a small cemetery, in the woods behind the church. And some say that at night if you go into the church or venture into the woods to that small cemetery, you may see the ghosts of the little girls walking about. Others say you can still hear their screams echoing in the darkness.

About the Author:

Hiya, my name is **Jason Ryan Qualls.** I live in Elkhart, Indiana. I love watching horror movies and reading Tales from the Crypt comics. The books that got me into reading scary stories were called The scariest stories you've ever heard and Tales for the midnight hour. My mom bought me a few of these at a garage sale when I was a kid. I've been hooked on scary stories every since.

The Scarred Room

Lee Clark Zumpe

The fuzzy gray haze that smothered the city was giving way to night when seven travelers arrived on Terrance Avenue. Each of them was exhausted by that hour, and the mother and father were eager to find shelter for their five children.

Lennard smiled at his family as they paraded down the sidewalk in the gloom of dusk. He was thankful that they had managed to survive another day.

With all of their worldly possessions on their backs or stashed in the rusty grocery cart that Lennard guided, they set their sights on the old Princess Martha Hotel. It was a rundown tenement long ago abandoned by its owners and annexed by the homeless. The father hoped that the family's combined take for the day could buy them a room away from the pushers and pimps that ruled the first floor.

The front entrance was flanked by tall, grim-faced thugs. Bulges in their loose-fitting flannel shirts hinted at the automatic weapons hidden from sight. They eyed Lennard with stinging repugnance, but they made no move against him. He peered past them, into the darkened lobby beyond the doorway. Junkies lined the walls, crashed on soiled sheets or rolled into embryonic balls on the floor.

"Wait for me here," he said as he began to climb the steps. The Princess was worse *t*han he recalled. Still, it was their only hope for the evening. "I'll be out in a minute – Mark, you watch over things."

He had a great deal of faith in his eldest son.

Lennard choked on the foul air as he walked across the lobby toward the desk. Cheap incense, opium, marijuana and crack mingled to mask the stench of death and putrefaction. The addicts, the pushers, and the whores must have grown accustomed to it over time.

"I need a room for seven...two adults and five children."

"I can manage that," said an older fellow behind the desk. He was by no means decrepit and feeble-looking; this old veteran was tall and lean and built solidly. "How much do you have?"

"Not much," Lennard said as he slammed a twenty down.

“More than most of these bums got once they settle their debts with the candyman.” The man whisked the money off the counter and spun around. He heaved an oversized lead strongbox off the floor and opened it. Picking through dozens of assorted keys, he finally brought one up close to his eyes. “Yes: This will do. Room 342, one bed and a mattress, toilet don’t work but then none of ‘em do.”

“Is that the largest...”

“Look,” he interrupted before Lennard could finish his question, “That’s the best room I’ve got tonight; all the others are bought up, and what’s left isn’t even livable.”

“I was just hoping for something a bit more roomy,” Lennard explained as he took the key from the clerk. He was about to walk away when someone from the shadows behind the desk spoke out.

“What about the suite?”

Lennard turned around and saw that the clerk’s face had grown pale, and his eyes were white and wide. He quickly closed the strongbox and wrapped his arms around it to return it to the floor.

“He could take the suite, couldn’t he...no one ever uses it anymore.” A tall, black man with gold teeth stepped from the pools of darkness and smiled. “He looks like a nice-enough fellow, don’t think nothing would bother him in the suite, do you?”

“The suite isn’t up for rent, and you know that Alvin.” The clerk nervously dropped the strongbox on the floor. “Look,” he said, turning back to Lennard, “Just take your family to room 342; forget about the suite.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Lennard said, his interest growing, “What’s the matter with this suite?”

“Some bad things happened there a long time ago; some say its haunted now. Some say the devil himself took up residence. All I know is that ain’t no one stayed in that place for a full night for as long as I can remember. Mostly people avoid it, and those that don’t usually don’t stay there for very long.” The clerk turned to Alvin and caught his glaring eyes. There was anger in the old man’s expression, but there was fear there, too. “Why don’t you get moving; the halls get pretty dark.”

“How much would you give me if I managed to spend the night in that suite?”

“I told you, the room ain’t...”

“I wasn’t speaking to you.” This time it was Lennard that interrupted the clerk. “What was your name: Alvin? How about it Alvin? My family stays in room 342, and I spend the night in the suite...care to make a wager on my chances?”

“Certainly, pilgrim.” Alvin pulled a wad of bills from his front pocket. He set two hundred dollar bills on the counter under the clerk’s nose. “These are yours to collect if you make it through to the morning...and don’t try to sneak out: I’ll be watching.”

Though his wife did not approve of his plans, Lennard sent his family on to room 342 for the night. He promised them that in the morning they could afford a real breakfast. Mark excitedly informed them all that his order would include pancakes, eggs and a plate full of bacon.

Lennard cautiously made his way up the dark stairwell. With only the feeble glow of a candle to light the way, he was careful to monitor the shadows guardedly as he approached the suite. Occasionally, the dim light would peel ashen faces from the darkness and he would quietly side-step heroin addicts stretched across the floor.

Finally, he entered the supposedly haunted suite and locked the door behind him. He came first into a large chamber he imagined must have been the living room once upon a time. He brushed aside spider webs as he walked from one room to another, making certain that he was alone.

He came to rest in the master bedroom. It was a spacious chamber that had no doubt once held ornate furnishings. In its day it must have been a lavish penthouse, filled with fine art and costly decorations. Now, it was all but barren having been looted repeatedly over the years.

Sheets were strewn over the floor, and as Lennard walked over them he could feel shards of broken glass crunch beneath his feet. He sat down in the center of the room and set his candle on the floor at his side. Next, he pulled a switchblade from his jacket and laid it down on the sheet.

He sat there for at least an hour, listening intently to traffic noises drifting up from the streets and wafting through the broken windows. When the temperature began to drop, Lennard decided to gather up some of the sheets to wrap about himself. He drew back a corner of the sheet and revealed a reddish arc painted across the carpetless floor.

Lennard soon had all the sheets pulled away from the center of the room and bunched up in piles along the walls. He took a couple of extra candles from his pocket and lit them, then placed them on opposite sides of

the room. With the additional light, the full extent of the drawing now was exposed.

Lennard recognized the occult symbol scribed on the floor as a pentagram. He shuddered as he considered the source of the crimson-colored substance that had served as the artist's ink. Words coiled about a circle ringing the five-pointed star, but Lennard could not guess their meaning.

He knelt inside the circle and traced the lettering with a finger.

"Looks like you found one of the suite's secrets." The voice startled Lennard so he gasped. Quickly, he jumped up and scanned the floor for his switchblade. Alvin laughed, and pointed to a corner where the blade rested. "Don't worry pilgrim: I'm only checking up on you."

"I thought you were afraid of this place." Lennard said, watching the black man's movements deliberately.

"Oh, I am. But the demons don't come out until long after midnight."

"You're trying to scare me off. You don't think I believe this place is haunted by demons, do you?"

"I don't give a shit what you believe man," Alvin said, smiling. The flickering candles touched his gold teeth and sparkled. "I don't know what it is that awakens down here every night, to tell you the truth. I got a theory, though, if you're interested."

"What?"

"I think that places – houses, graveyards, motel rooms and such – can be scarred as sure as that knife in your hand can leave a man permanently scarred if the blade cuts deep enough. Something happened here that clawed at the walls and the ceilings. It left deep wounds that won't never heal."

"Sounds like you're trying to scare me off again."

"Naw, boss. But you might want to keep two things in mind: First, keep that switchblade close – in your hands at all times; and, second," Alvin turned and began to walk away, "The lock on the door don't work too good."

Lennard settled back down on the floor, wedging himself into a corner. He gathered a few sheets around his legs for warmth, and he watched the candles wavering in the breeze that blew in from the city streets. Before the first candle had burned out, Lennard had fallen asleep.

Something awoke Lennard quite suddenly, and he felt his fingers close around the switchblade's handle in his hand. Shadows had annexed

the room while he dreamed, and he longed for the frail light of a single candle.

Almost at once he heard the gnashing of teeth coming from the adjacent room. He sprung to his feet as his eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and he slowly edged toward the door. There was movement in the large chamber, strange sounds echoed through the whole suite.

Then a white light flooded the master bedroom and Lennard stopped. He was petrified, unable to move or think or scream. The scraping of claws on the floor was almost upon him when he saw its weird shadow creep through the door.

What followed was the most hideous thing Lennard ever beheld. He was seized with anguish as the goat-headed serpent slithered into the room, propelled by dozens of insect-like legs. Lennard's heart felt as though it had burst in his chest, his blood grew icy in his veins. The beast surveyed the room angrily, and in a moment its fiery eyes fixed upon the intruder. Its toothy snarl left Lennard with no doubt as to its intentions.

Lennard's fears threatened to overwhelmed him, but he remained steady and clear-headed. He would certainly not surrender quietly. He raised the switchblade high in the air and plunged into the milky white radiance surging into the room. He growled as he pounced onto the terrible beast.

It howled and thrashed as the blade dipped again and again into its slimy hide. Finally the thing stopped writhing and heaved up a heavy sigh that was its last breath.

Lennard had only an instant to celebrate the demon's death before the infernal gates of hell opened once more and let loose a legion of horrors upon him. The floor trembled and the walls shook. Thunder rumbled through the suite. The pentagram upon the floor ignited with a garish, ruby red brilliance.

Through the walls and down from the ceiling, monstrous things poured into the room. From every side Lennard felt straining claws snapping at him, tentacles reaching and jaws grinding. Brandishing his switchblade as though it was a broadsword and he a dragonslayer, Lennard hacked and slashed and sliced and stabbed wildly until blood covered his arms and coated his legs and drenched his clothes and pooled on the floor beneath him.

No matter how fiercely he fought the demons kept coming. They crawled from chasms of darkness and streamed from cracks in the plaster walls. The clawed their way through the floor, hissing and spitting and barking.

Still, no matter how desperate the situation grew Lennard never relaxed his pace. He attacked blindly when the eerie demon-fires began to subside, snarling with rage and eager to spill more blood.

A ghastly demon lunged at him, its talons sweeping him to the floor. Even as its fangs sought his flesh Lennard drove his blade deep into one of its eyes. The thing screamed and trembled and crashed down upon him.

His muscles aching, his ribs bruised and battered, Lennard crawled out from beneath the slain demon. He hastened to a corner of the room, his blade still firm in his grasp, and waited for the next round to begin. Cold sweat sprang from pores over his body and he tried anxiously to catch his breath.

Lennard huddled in that corner for some time waiting, but the siege had ended. Soon, the first traces of dawn painted the sky bright orange and sent fingers of light clambering across the bloody floor. Shadows passed away with the coming of the day. The sunrise slowly conquered the darkness and illuminated the room.

Lennard's senses were slow to return. He cradled his head in his hands, and he shuddered as he wept. He was exhausted, and he was badly scarred.

But he had survived.

Finally he stood to survey the damage. He almost feared to look upon the demons he had slain, afraid that their repulsiveness would cause him mental strain. Still, he had to see their vile forms and to know how awful these things were.

Lennard's heart stopped beating and the switchblade fell from his hand. Littering the floor in pools of blood were several twisted bodies, but they were not those of monsters and demons. Spread out before him were human bodies, ones that seemed uncomfortably familiar.

By the door was a mangled corpse, its features torn from its face by his blade: It might have been his wife. In a corner opposite him was a bloody little head that had cracked and burst: It could have been his youngest son.

Lennard ran screaming from the room and sped down the stairs. He shot through the hallways looking for room 342: When he arrived, he found it locked so he pummeled the door with his shoulder until it splintered and gave way. The room was empty.

Next, he raced into the lobby, now sobbing uncontrollably. He lunged across the counter and grabbed the clerk's shirt with both hands, fingers digging deep. Alvin, who had been conversing with the desk clerk, drew back into the shadows.

"My wife...my children...where are they?"

"Sir," said the clerk, "They have been with you, in the suite, since 2 a.m."

About the Author:

Lee Clark Zumpe has been writing and publishing horror, dark fantasy and speculative fiction since the late 1990s. His short stories and poetry have appeared in a variety of publications such as *Weird Tales* and *Space and Time;* and in anthologies such as *Corpse Blossoms, Best New Zombie Tales Vol. 3, Cthulhu Unbound Vol. 1 and Future Lovecraft*. His work has earned several honorable mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* collections.

An entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, Lee has penned hundreds of film, theater and book reviews. His work for TBN has been recognized repeatedly by the Florida Press Association, including a first place award for criticism in the 2007 Better Weekly Newspaper Contest.

Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit www.leeclarkzumpe.com.

Crash Test

Ken Goldman

"C'mon, baby, do it for me! Do it!" Lincoln Rollins whispered as he watched the sporty yellow car accelerate to 45, then 50 MPH along the test track. "Just keep those folks where they belong inside that pretty little American-made chassis, baby. Just a few seconds more . . ."

Holding his clipboard and stopwatch before him, Rollins clocked the fresh-off-the-assembly-line Nocturne GL-XT at 55 MPH exactly 1.3 seconds before the vehicle hit the brick retaining wall dead-on. With a sharp crunch of tortured steel the bug-shaped automobile's hood popped open and twisted over on itself in thick rolls of sheet metal as the coupe went from 55 MPH to zero in one tenth of a second. In that brief time the Nocturne GL-XT changed its status significantly from compact to sub-compact.

The crush of metal echoed throughout the canyon surrounding the test track. As suddenly as the impact had occurred the noise quickly faded into ghostly silence, followed by a thick hiss of vapors escaping through a dozen of the car's ruined valves.

God bless America, thought Rollins, resisting the impulse to utter a quick prayer. Instead he silently waited for the smoke to clear. Once it did his face went pale.

"Made in America by Americans. Shit!" Rollins grumbled to himself. He turned to the man standing alongside him who held the camcorder, hating the question he had to ask. "Did you get all that, Eddie?" For a fleeting moment Lincoln hoped that maybe his man's video camera was among the few not made in Japan.

"Damn right I got it! Every bleeding second!" Eddie answered. "And from the looks of that piss-colored scrap pile I'd say that the boys who wear the Union label have whipped up their own version of the yellow peril. That car looks like the day after Hiroshima!"

Rollins did not feel much like smiling. Not with one hundred and fifty million Japanese dollars probably heading back to Tokyo because of this afternoon's little demonstration. One hundred and fifty million dollars Lincoln Rollins' manufacturing plant would never see rolling off the

National Motors assembly line, judging from that smoking testament to American craftsmanship being hosed down on the test track.

Well, maybe instead he could sell those Japanese money-men that goddamned retaining wall out there. After all, that stubborn little slab of masonry resisted the car's impact pretty nicely, yielding only a dozen dusty bricks that flew through the air and thumped to the earth near Rollins' feet like dead birds. The All-American Nocturne GL-XT clearly was no match for that fucking wall.

Nor were the car's four occupants, and the carnage that awaited Rollins' inspection of the vehicle's interior made him long for the good old days when they had used those old wooden crash dummies. Two adults awaited his clipboard's check-off list while seated in the Nocturne's front seats, and two children - a boy and a girl - were in the rear. Thirty minutes earlier Rollins' A-Team had securely harnessed each passenger in place, and the soft yield of the riders' cold dead flesh allowed a much more snug fit than those old crash dummies ever had.

The controversy regarding the use of cadavers in these tests still had not died down, and Rollins' A-Team often complained about feeling like the 21st century equivalent of Victor Frankenstein every time they raided the city morgue. But the Japanese investors insisted those wooden dummies just did not cut it for these tests. They wanted the real thing.

"Money talks," Rollins had explained to the crash crew. "And in this case it speaks Japanese."

Like some grotesque movie director casting the roles for a script entitled "The Wreck of the Nocturne GL-XT," Lincoln Rollins and his team of talent scouts raided the morgue for their casting call. There was something plainly obscene in the little scenario the more liberal-minded consumer rights folks insisted he create, but crash tests were as much a part of selling cars as were the bikinied beauties with big tits at the auto shows. Still, any day now Rollins expected to see the pickets outside his plant carrying signs declaring 'Cadaver Rights' and 'Dead Men Should Not Sell Cars'.

The real pisser was that the Nocturne's safety features served its cadaverous passengers remarkably well in today's test. Right on cue the driver's side air bag whooshed open from the steering column like a magic trick and ballooned itself around the well-dressed corpse behind the wheel.

Each of the four seat harnesses effectively held its respective passenger securely in place.

Trouble was, on impact the Nocturne's sporty sun-roof collapsed directly upon the heads of the two adult cadavers in the front seats and immediately relocated their brains to another position inside their skulls. Sure, the seat belts and driver's side air bag worked fine. But there was not much of a point in securing people inside a death trap.

Behind the wheel still sat Mr. Jonathan Smith, as Rollins had named him on his clipboard, a Caucasian male of approximately thirty just beginning to go gray. His real name was Steven Fisher when he was shot dead several weeks earlier, and he still bore a quarter-sized bullet hole that smeared the center of his forehead. Other than that, the man could have been selected right out of central casting to play the role of 'father' in this afternoon's mini-drama.

The man's real wife was named Susan, a woman pregnant, unemployed, and bewildered about why some punk in a convenience store had chosen to blow away her husband. The woman needed money, and National Motors, Inc. had money to give. In exchange Susan had only to offer her husband's remains. She rationalized to Rollins how Steven had once told her that he planned to be an organ donor, and she figured her decision would have been okay if her husband had been in any condition to ask.

Susan Fisher took Lincoln Rollins' check with a pained smile, but National Motors never received a thank you note.

Mr. Smith's head hurled directly into the puffy air-bag exactly as the Nocturne's American designers intended. Like a guy taking a quick nap nose-first into a large fluffy pillow after a hard day at the office, the man's face disappeared completely into the soft bag only to have his skull crushed like an eggshell by the collapsing roof. His scalp folded over on itself like the top of a sardine can.

The ten year old Puerto Rican kid who had been in the back seat had been rechristened Timmy Smith just for today. Several weeks earlier the child had been Carlos Santiago, Jr., a victim of a serious asthma attack on the very day he had forgotten to bring his inhaler with him to his Little League practice. National Motors of America, Inc. purchased the boy's body from his grief-stricken parents for the hefty sum of eight thousand dollars, a price considerably higher than that paid for the two adults because

children's corpses were so much harder to come by. Two weeks past his death a man from Rollins' A-Team hand picked the kid to play the ten year old son of Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Smith. Lincoln Rollins himself had helped to secure the limp body into his harness in the back seat.

Playing the role of the wife was a black woman at least twenty years her husband's senior, but this week the morgue was fresh out of white women in their twenties. Mrs. Mary Smith fared much worse than her husband. Her side of the front seat had no air bag to counteract the laws of inertia that stated a body hurled forward in a vehicle going 55 MPH kept right on going after slamming into a brick wall. As an alcoholic named Ramona Sweeney, two weeks earlier the fifty-something woman learned a similar lesson about the law of gravity when she swung from the end of a rope just inches from the stool she had kicked out from under her.

This afternoon inside the Nocturne GL-XT the harness belt kept Ramona/Mary safely secured to her seat, and if she were not already dead the woman might have almost cheated death this time. But on impact her face slammed full-force against the passenger's side window, and her mouth struck the cushioned beam support as the roof came down on her head like a metal avalanche. Several of the woman's front choppers, propelled at 55 MPH, embedded themselves in the soft vinyl of the dashboard while an assortment of her molars and incisors showered the vehicle's interior like hailstones. One landed in little Timmy's palm.

From where he stood fifty feet from the Nocturne's passenger side Lincoln Rollins watched the woman flop forward in her seat like a rag doll, then shatter her jaw grotesquely against the side window as if her face were caught inside a revolving door. Her mouth slammed into the glass and distorted into a bloody grin that seemed aimed at the video camera.

On his clipboard Rollins had penciled in the six year old girl seated in the rear as 'Sarah Smith'. The kid was possibly an American Indian who was skinny enough to have died of starvation, but Rollins could not tell for sure. Drenched in a mixture of blood belonging to her and to the late Carlos Santiago Jr., inside the wrecked compact the damaged young cadaver's ethnic origins could just as well have been the planet Neptune.

What happened to the two kids in the back seat was another story altogether. Their seat belts worked perfectly too, but that created an unexpected problem. Because the rear seats of the Nocturne were so close

together Timmy's head slammed into little Sarah's, each kid's head doing close to 55 MPH along with their mother's teeth.

And so at 1:37 p.m., five minutes after impact, Mr. Jonathan Smith sat inside the crushed Nocturne GL-XT surrounded by his loving blood-soaked wife and kids with whom he had been matched less than an hour earlier . . . just your average family man who had taken his family of cadavers out for a leisurely afternoon drive into a brick wall.

Lincoln Rollins would officially learn the bottom line later in the day, but he did not need to wait for that information. One look at the wreck told him that the four skulls inside the Nocturne GL-XT were probably crushed flat enough to serve coffee and danish on them.

Not a sight to make those consumer folks nor his Japanese investors very happy, Rollins thought. He knew what the money men from the Land of the Rising Sun would say once that videotape rolled. And he knew their last words to him and to National Motors, Inc. would be *Sayonara, guys*. . .

So sorry, Mr. Rollins, but perhaps you and your automobile designers would be wise to cut your losses and pour all those Yankee dollars back into Toyotas. Why not leave the automobile designing business to the boys from Tokyo for a decade or so, and invite us back when you have a real car to show us instead of some Tonka Toy?

"Goddammit! This isn't over!" Rollins shouted out to his B-Team who were walking off, having finished hosing down the automobile. "I don't give a shit if we have to empty that fucking morgue! We'll come back with a new Nocturne, I promise you guys that! One with a roof that stays where it's supposed to! And I promise that when we pick out the next Mr. Jonathan Smith for this test, that fucking cadaver is going to be Japanese!"

One of the men turned to Rollins. "Yeah, right," he said, and kept walking.

Rollins and the man holding the camcorder approached the wrecked Nocturne and stepped between two of the crash specialists who were studying the dashboard containing the woman's teeth. Lincoln dreaded what he had to say next.

"Okay, Eddie. Get some close-ups of the crash victims, will you?"

"Thought you'd never ask," he answered. The man hoisted the camera to his shoulder, and flicking the 'RECORD' switch he aimed it at the blood-soaked corpses inside. "Okay, people. Big smiles!" He turned back to Rollins. "Jesus! Talk about your dysfunctional family!"

"Knock it off, Eddie, okay?" Lincoln Rollins said as he checked off the physical damage noted in little Timmy Smith's column on the clipboard. He did not see anything funny about kissing off one hundred and fifty million dollars. He felt tired and his complexion was as pale as the cadavers inside the car. The last thing Rollins felt like doing was writing that official report. Clicking his ballpoint shut he let the clipboard drop to his side. His eyes beaded in on the man aiming his Sony video camera at the carload of mangled corpses.

"You know something, Eddie? I think maybe it's time that someone around here showed a little respect for the dead." Even before he completed the sentence, he felt like an idiot for having said it. He had been the one most responsible for having these four people die one more time than was necessary.

"Maybe someone around here could also use a cold beer," Eddie said, clicking off the camcorder. "That official paperwork can wait an hour. What do you say? You think anyone'll give two shits today if management and labor sit down over a few cold ones? I'll even let you pick up the first round so you don't think I'm just kissing ass, which of course I am."

Rollins dug deep inside himself and somehow managed to find a smile. He shoved his pen into his pocket. "Thanks, Eddie. Yeah, that sounds like one fine idea."

The two men walked off together leaving the smoldering vehicle behind them on the test track.

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Inside what remained of the Nocturne GL-XT, young Timmy Smith strained against his seat harness and leaned forward, his teeth stained with blood.

"That was great, Dad! Can we do it again?"

About the Author:

Ken Goldman is a former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies. An affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association, Ken has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore depending on the track of the sun and his need for a tan. His stories appear in over 650 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia. Over thirty of Ken's tales are due for publication in 2012-2013, and he is currently putting the finishing touches on his novel, *...OF A FEATHER*. (You hear that, publishers?) Since 1993 his tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. His book of short stories, YOU HAD ME AT

ARRGH!! : FIVE UNEASY PIECES BY KEN GOLDMAN (Sam's Dot Publishers) had been an all-time top ten best seller at the former online independent press book store, the Genre Mall, and his novella, “Desiree,” is available in eBook downloadable format on the Damnation Books web site and on Amazon.com in Kindle and print format. Ken isn’t famous yet; he expects that to happen posthumously. Poe, Lovecraft, King, Goldman --- yeah, that sounds about right.

A Little Girl

Tammy A. Branom

Jeanette

Gee, the water looks like fun. But, I can't--just can't--get in.

I sit on the bank with my chin on my knees and my arms around my legs. Kids gallop down the boat dock and splash into Blue Lake. Fir trees fence the shoreline like sentinels staving back life's woes. It *is* peaceful here. No wonder Mom and Dad put a house just beyond those trees.

I watch my boyfriend Sam cut long strokes in the sapphire lake. I'm terrified of the water; I stiffen like a corpse in it. So, here I sit, in the shade, listening to everybody's laughter and the trees swishing behind me.

I rest my right cheek on my knee and watch the trees sway like a cradle. Footsteps thump next to me.

"Hey, Jeanette," Sam says softly. "Are you sure you don't want to go in?"

"I'm sure," I answer, tucking my brown locks behind my ears.

Drops spill from the tips of Sam's black hair. He cocks his head to one side and touches my shoulder.

I smile at him. "It's ok, really. Go have fun." He will never understand my fear. I don't even understand my fright.

I watch Sam jog back to the water. I lean back and stretch out my legs. I really don't know what made me look to the left again, but I did.

There stands this little girl about six years old just inside the trees. Her dress is dirty gray. It may have once been a white Sunday dress, maybe something like I wore to church when I was a little girl. Her dark pigtails droop wet and stringy over her shoulders. Her body trembles and her shoulders roll together with every heavy sob she drags. She is like a black and white photo against a color panorama.

I think of all the horrible things that could have brought this child to the tree line. Terrors. Dark, cold, wet, terrors.

My eyes never leave her as I rise to my feet. Slowly, I turn to the lake.

"Hey!" I yell to everyone. I glance back to make sure she's still there and she is. "Help!" I wave my arms to get someone's attention. No one

can hear me. "HEY!"

Some heads turn. Some stop swimming. I point at the little girl.

"She needs help." I look back at her, and she is heading into the briars and bushes under the trees.

"Wait, wait!" I shout and race after her. "Wait, little girl!"

I follow the gray form into the shadows and slices of sun. She is like a rabbit, ducking to and fro through the twigs and thorns.

I lose her.

"Little girl, I want to help you." My voice empties into the woods.

Tiny sobs behind jerk me into a twist, and there she is--her head hung low, her dark eyes peeking between wet strands of straggly hair.

"Honey, I want to help you." I hold out my hands to her. She shakes her head.

"Jeanette, where are you? What's going on?" Sam calls. A group tramples behind him, crunching the brush.

"I'm here," I reply as I reach for her hands. "Come with me."

She shakes her head harder and whimpers.

"Why not?"

She glances to her side, as if seeing someone, hearing someone.

"I'm...dead?"Her wide, dark eyes plunge into my soul. And then, she is gone. Vanished.

My neck muscles tighten; my legs are like putty. The moist dirt craters under my knees and raises between my fingers as I drop. I can't catch my breath. I recall hands pulling my wrists and arms. Brilliant sunshine washes out the world and concerned voices float like dreams.

"Save her," blubbers a familiar female voice.

"Help me!" a male voice bellows.

I think of my white dress as cold oozes around me.

The hands slip away.

<u>The Way Sam Saw It</u>

Sam stopped mid-stroke. On shore, Jeanette waved her arms frantically. *What was wrong? Was someone hurt?*

Jeanette pointed to the trees, her arm pumping back and forth.

What was in the trees? Sam saw nothing. Is she leaving? *She could have come in the water. I really would stay beside her.*

Her house is just past the woods. Maybe she's going home for something.

Jeanette's mouth formed words; however, the breeze across Blue Lake stifled her shouts. Some noticed. Swimmers began to bob quietly, straining to hear her.

Jeanette took off like a track star--heading into the woods.

Sam's heart rate jumped an extra few beats a minute. *What is going on? Where is she going? What happened?*

Sam powered long, smooth strokes to the shore. Water splashed against his race to the shallow edge.

Please, Jeanette, don't do something crazy.

He started for the trees, and one of his friends yelled, "Shoes!" Whipping around, Sam nearly bowled over three of his buddies.

"Take mine." Sam's friend slipped out of his sneakers, and Sam stepped into the snug fit. He sprinted for the thicket, a small group in tow.

He could see Jeanette, her skin like a ghost in the shadows, her arms out as if she were coaxing someone. "Jeanette, what's going on?"

She looked at him, her eyes wide and glistening. "I'm here."

Sam pushed harder, thorns tearing his skin, branches switching his arms, legs, and face. He watched Jeanette's legs crumble, the earth collapsing beneath her.

I'm almost there. Hang on.

She sunk into the wet mud.

Sam dropped beside her, grabbing her wrist with one hand and her arm with another. He dug his heels into the ground where it was still solid and tugged Jeanette, straining himself completely backward to pull her from the marshy pit. Her arms slipped from his grip and she sank quickly, leaving only her face revealed.

Rays of sunlight fingered through the trees and lit Jeanette's face. She moaned and her eyes fluttered. Friends and neighbors rushed in.

"Save her," blubbered Jeanette's best friend Linda.

"Help me!" Sam bellowed as he stretched out to latch onto her again, his reach falling short.

Jeanette closed her eyes and disappeared into the marsh.

<u>The Little Girl</u>

Mommy combs my hair into pigtails.

"Now, I want you to sit on the couch until it's time to go to church." Mommy smoothes my new white dress.

"Okay, Mommy," I say and skip to the living room.

Sunshine is coming in the big window. I want to go play. I sneak out onto the front porch. Mommy won't mind if I sit on the porch swing.

The chains crunch, crunch in the hooks as I swing. I hear laughing--lots of kids laughing. I stop the swing with my toes and listen. Kids must be at the lake. I want to go.

I cup my hands against the window and peek inside for Mommy or Daddy.

I'll only be a couple of minutes. I just want to see.

I tiptoe down the steps and run across the yard and into the woods. I follow the path that Mommy and Daddy always take me on to go to the lake. It's a little dark still, but I'm not afraid. I know to stay on the path.

I'm almost there. The laughing is louder. I can see the big kids through the trees.

Maybe I should go back. The big kids might tease me, pull my pigtails, and make me cry. Then Mommy will know I didn't sit on the couch like she said.

I stop at the edge of the woods and watch the people swimming. I wish I could swim. Mommy and Daddy always help me because I can't make my arms and legs go right.

Oh, no. Someone sees me. One of the big kids sees me, and she's looking right at me!

I start to cry. Mommy and Daddy will be so mad at me.

"Hey!" the big girl yells, and starts waving at her friends.

I've got to run! I've got to get home, but if I follow the path, the big kids will see me. They'll catch me, pull my pigtails, knock me down, and get my dress dirty.

I run off the path--into the bushes.

"Wait, little girl," the big girl calls. But, I'm not going to wait. I duck under branches and trip over twigs.

Oh, no! Thorns catch my dress, and it rips. I can't get my breath. I've got to get away. I've got to get home.

"Where are you?" I hear Daddy call.

"Daddy!" I start to run to him. The dirt and leaves squish under my foot, and I fall forward. But, it doesn't hurt. The ground comes up over me. It is cold and wet. It goes in my ears, my nose, and my mouth.

I can't breathe! I can't move! Daddy!

Then I see…an angel.

"Honey, I want to help you." The angel holds her arms out to me.

I want Mommy and Daddy, so I shake my head no.

The angel reaches for my hands. "Come with me," she says.

I shake my head again, harder this time.

"Why not?" the angel asks.

"Save her!" Mommy cries out.

"Help me!" Daddy yells.

The angel disappears. Now I feel warm. I open my eyes--just a little.

Sunshine. Daddy's face. Daddy's arms under me.

"She's dead!" Mommy is screaming and crying.

I'm dead?

She's crying so hard.

"Let's take her home," Daddy says. I think he is crying, too.

I'm never going near the lake again. I don't want to swim. I just don't want to.

About the author:

Tammy A. Branom is a freelance writer living and working in the breathtaking Columbia River Gorge in Washington State and has been published in various print and online venues including numerous Static Movement and Rainstorm Press anthologies. She's also a columnist for *Unexplained Mysteries.* For more, visit her website at www.tammyabranom.com

The Twins

Jason Ryan Qualls

When I was seventeen, and before I was married to my first husband, I found out that I was pregnant. At that time I was carrying twins. A few weeks later I began having complications, and one of my twin babies had died.

At the time I was living with my parents. My best friend and I shared a room which had been added onto the house years before. One morning I had woke up very early, and felt a strange presence staring at me. In the corner of my bedroom by the door, I saw a small child. It was a little girl about three or four years old. She had long golden brown curls and she was dressed in a frilly blue dress. She looked very upset and very afraid. I attempted to talk to her but she disappeared.

At the time I didn't mention this to anyone in the house, but continued to see her quite often. Each time that I saw her I would try to speak with her, and she would disappear. Then one night my Mom and my best friend and I were in my room laying in my bed just talking about stuff. My Mom turned her head toward the corner of the room. I noticed that she turned a bit pale, then shook her head. When we asked her what was wrong she stated that she must be too tired because she was starting to see things.

And at that time, I knew that it wasn't just me anymore. I asked my mother what she saw. She stated that she saw a beautiful little girl standing in the corner. I asked her to describe the little girl and my mother described everything, exactly the same way that I had seen her. I then explained that I had been seeing this child frequently, and how I tried to communicate with her. My mother suggested that I keep trying to do so. So for the next few months, I would talk to this little spirit. And before long she stopped disappearing. But she still made no effort to respond.

Then in late November of 1995, I gave birth to my other existing twin baby Kathleen. The little spirit was now becoming a more frequent visitor. As the baby grew she would push her in her wind-up baby swing, play with her in her walker, and watch over her while she slept. But the whole time the little girl seemed sad.

Then one night, she came to me in a dream and asked me what I would have named her had she been born too. That is when I realized that this little girl was the child that I had lost during my pregnancy. I told her that I would have named her Courtney. And in my dream I held her in my arms. Since that night she has appeared less frequently, but when she does, she is smiling.

I thought that she was wanting me to focus more on my other children. My daughter is now three, the same age as my little spirit child. And she looks identical to the little spirit who once stood in my room every night not too long ago. I know that she still visits her twin sister every now and then. Kathleen has told me about how Courtney comes to play with her and her new baby brother.

I feel secure that there is a precious little angel looking out for them.

About the Author:

Jason Ryan Qualls is a very talented writer with a great imagination. He has the makings of a very popular author. You can see his work in other upcoming Static Movement anthologies.

The Beauty of Death

Jason Ryan Qualls

This story is dedicated to my grandfather, Elmer, who took his own life. Many wonder why some commit suicide. Perhaps this story will help explain the reason.

My best friend had been dead for about a month when the phone rang.

Midnight.

Cold in the house and dragged from sleep to answer the call. My wife was gone for the weekend. I, being alone in the house, thought it best to answer it. It might be important.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Jason."

"Who is this?"

"You know me. It's Elmer . . . Your best friend."

Cold. Deep and intense. The receiver dead-cold matter in my hand.

"Elmer died four weeks ago."

"Four weeks, three days, two hours and twenty seven minutes ago- to be exact."

"Who *are* you?" A chuckle. The same dry chuckle I'd heard so many times. "C'mon ole buddy, after twenty years, Hell, you know me."

"This is a damned joke!"

"No joke, Jason. You're there alive. And I'm here dead. And you know something, old buddy... I'm really glad I did it."

"Did what?"

"Killed myself. Because death is just what I hoped it would be. No sadness or disappointment, or worries. Absolutely beautiful, peaceful, quiet, content, complete, and where I belong... no pressures. Death is a paradise without tears or suffering."

"Elmer's death was ruled an accident. A concrete freeway barrier... His car-"

"I aimed my car for that barrier," the voice on the phone told me. "Pedal to the floor. Doing over ninety when I hit. No accident, Jason." The voice cold.

So cold.

"I wanted to be dead. And no regrets." I tried to laugh, make light of this madness- matching his chuckle with my own.

"Dead men don't use telephones."

"I'm not really using the phone, not in a physical sense. It's just that I chose to contact you this way. You might say it's a matter of 'psychic electricity'. As a detached spirit I'm able to align my cosmic vibrations to match the vibrations of this power line. Simple, really."

"Sure a snap. Nothing to it."

"Naturally, you're skeptical. I expected you to be. But listen carefully to me, Jason." And I listened- with the phone gripped in my hand in that cold, dark house- as the voice told me things that only Elmer could know. Intimate details of shared experiences extending back through two decades. And when he'd finished I was certain of one thing:

He was my best friend Elmer.

"But how... I still don't..."

"Think of this phone as a 'medium', a line of force through which I can bridge the gap between us." The dry chuckle again. "Hell, you gotta admit it beats holding hands around a table in the dark, yet the principle is the same." I'd been standing by my desk, transfixed by the voice. Now I moved behind the desk, sat down, trying to absorb this dark miracle. My muscles were wire-taut, my fingers cramped about the black receiver. I dragged in a slow breath, the night dampness of the room pressing at me. "Alright, I don't believe in ghosts, I don't pretend to understand any of this... but I'll accept it. I must accept it."

"I'm glad, Jason, because it's important that we talk." A long moment of hesitation. Then the voice, lower now, softer. "I know how bad things have been for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I just know how things are going for you. And I want to help. As your friend, I want you to know that I understand."

"Well I'm really not..."

"You been feeling bad, haven't you? Kind of 'down', right?"

"Yeah a little, I guess."

"And I don't blame you. You've got reasons. Lots of reasons. For one it has been what? About two years since you lost your son to a car accident right after graduation right? I know the both of you were close."

Jason's heart sank, thinking back to all the good times he and his son shared together. The first time he taught his son how to play catch football. When his son made his first touchdown in High school. When he taught his son how to drive. When he bought his son his very own car and the smile he had on his face.

His friend Elmer went on, "There's your money problem, you're behind on your house payments"

"I'm expecting a raise. My boss promised me one within the next few weeks."

"You won't get it, Jason. I know. He's lying to you. Right now, at this moment, he's looking for another to replace you at the company. Your boss is planning to fire you."

"He never liked me. We never got along from the day I walked into that office."

"And your wife... All the arguments you've been having with her lately. It's a pattern, Jason. Your marriage is all over. Your wife is going to ask you for a divorce. She's in love with another man."

"Who, damn it? What's his name?"

"You don't know him. Wouldn't change things if you did. She met him in an Internet chat room. There's nothing you can do about it now. She just doesn't love you anymore. These things happen to people."

"We've been drifting apart for the last year but I didn't know why. I had no idea that she-"

"And then there's your daughter. She's back on them, Jason. Only it's worse now. A lot worse. She has also been selling off her body to any man that would give her money and the attention that you couldn't give her."

I knew what he meant and the coldness raked along my body. She was sixteen now and she'd been into drugs for the past three years. But she promised to quit. "What do you know about my little princess? Tell me! Please!"

"She's into the heavy stuff. She's hooked bad. It's too late for her."

"What the hell are you saying?"

"I'm saying she's lost to you. She's rejected you, and there's no reaching her. She hates you. Blames you for everything."

Jason knew it was true. It all began when he found out that his daughter had been molested at a young age. But the fact of knowing that he was powerless, that there was nothing he could have done to protect her,

agonized his conscious. "But I tried to do my best for her!" He screamed into the phone.

"It wasn't enough, Jason. We both know that. You'll never see her again." The blackness was welling within me, a choking wave through my body. "Listen to me, old buddy. Things are going to get worse, not better. I know. I went through my own kind of Hell when I was alive."

"I'll start over. Leave the city to go work with my brother at his business."

"Your brother doesn't want you in his life. You'd be an intruder. An alien. He never writes or calls you, does he?"

"No, but that doesn't mean-"

"Not even a card last Christmas. No letters or calls. He doesn't want you with him, he thinks you're a joke. Believe me."

And then he began to tell me other things. He began to talk about middle age and how it was too late now to make any kind of new beginning. He told me that soon I would go to see a doctor about being tired all the time and be told that I have cancer and would eventually die anyway.

"Do you really want to die a slow painful death, Jason? To slowly be crippled by cancer, to slowly waste away into nothingness?" He spoke of disease. Loneliness and disappointment. Of rejection and despair. Of pain and suffering.

And worst of all sadness. And the blackness was complete, soothing, and warm. A blanket that brings both peace and happiness to your soul. "There's only one real solution to the curse of life, just one. That gun you keep in your desk upstairs. Use it, Jason. Use the gun."

"I couldn't do that."

"But why not? What other choice have you got? The solution is there. Go upstairs and use the gun. No one will miss you. You're already dead in the minds of those you thought loved you. Didn't you once tell me you wish you were never born? What have you ever amounted to in your sad existence? There is more sadness than happiness in life. How many tears does it take for you to realize that death is the only solution to the pain?

"Life creates scars that only death can heal. Eventually your memory will become nothingness in the winds of time. I'll be waiting for you afterward. You won't be alone anymore. It'll be like the old days. We'll be together. I know you're scared but death is beautiful. I know life is ugly and painful, and hurtful. But the beauty of death is its gift to end our tears. Use

the gun, Jason... use the gun" Jason began to cry. There was only one thing left to do.

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When his wife came back home, she screamed in horror to find Jason dead in the chair. A shotgun blast blew off his face and splattered his brain on the ceiling and walls. She fainted from the gory sight of it.

***

I've been dead for a week now, and my buddy Elmer was right. It's fine here. No sadness, no worries, or suffering. None of the daily stress of having to make a living because I'm no longer alive. Not in a physical form per se.

Quiet and beautiful. Peaceful, everlasting tranquility.

I know how bad things have been going for you. And they won't get any better.

Isn't that your phone ringing?

Better answer it.

It's important that we talk.

"The fear of death disappears when one has reached their limit of suffering."

-Dr. Jack Kevorkian

About the Author:

Jason Ryan Qualls is a very talented writer with a great imagination. He has the makings of a very popular author. You can see his work in other upcoming Static Movement anthologies.

I Love You

Jason Ryan Qualls

A young girl and her mother went to the mall one day. They came to an antique shop. The mother told her young child to stay by the old toys. While looking at them the little girl noticed a cute little teddy bear with the words "I LOVE YOU," written on a red heart attached to its chest. The little girl ran to her mother and pleaded for her to buy the teddy bear.

The mother gave in to her child's wishes and bought the toy bear. That night the child slept with the bear in her arms. The next morning when the mother awoke, she found her child lying in her bed, drenched in blood... dead.

The day after the child's funeral, the mother, missing her daughter, slept in the little girl's room. In the middle of the night, she noticed that the teddy bear had moved from its original position on the shelf, to a desk next to the bed.

The mother thought she must be imagining things and went back to sleep. The next morning when the father noticed that his wife wasn't around, he found her in their daughter's bedroom dead.

Laying in a puddle of blood.

After his wife's funeral, the father, while getting ready to move out of the house that brought him so much grief, was in his daughter's bedroom. He had to get rid of all his daughter's belongings, so as to begin the process of restarting his new life. He came across the teddy bear and said, "What the hell is this horrible thing doing here?"

The teddy no longer said "I LOVE YOU," instead it said, “I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!” Disgusted, the man threw the teddy bear away.

Later that man was also found dead in a pool of blood.

***

A few weeks later, another little girl went with her mother to an antique store. There they found a cute little teddy bear and across its chest were the words, “I LOVE YOU”...

What they didn't know was that the very same bear they would later take home would spell their doom.

The bear had belonged to a serial killer. And he still owns it.

About the Author:

Jason Ryan Qualls is a very talented writer with a great imagination. He has the makings of a very popular author. You can see his work in other upcoming Static Movement anthologies.

Peekaboo

Jason Ryan Qualls

She awoke with the feeling that she wasn't alone in the house. She sat up in bed, tense and wary, a crawling sensation on the back of her scalp. The night was dark, moonless; warm clotted black surrounded her.

She rubbed sleep from her eyes. Blinking until she could make out the vague grayish outlines of the open window in one wall, and a little more of the scenery beyond it, the curtains fluttered eerily in the hot summer breeze. Ears straining , she listened. There wasn't anything to hear. The house seemed almost graveyard still, void of even the faintest of night sounds. What was it that had woken her up? A noise of some kind? An intuition of danger?

It might only have been a bad dream, except that she couldn't remember dreaming. And it might only have been her imagination, but she couldn't remember if she had left her bedroom window open. Also, she had the feeling of not being alone. The feeling was strong, urgent.

There's somebody in the house, she thought, *or something*.

She had lived alone for only a short time after her boyfriend had recently broke up with her. In spite of herself she remembered the story of the nervous real estate agent. He had told her about this house, its macabre history. It had been built in the early 1900s. A man first lived here alone for all of his adult life. He had been a recluse whom the locals considered strange and probably evil; they hadn't had anything to do with him.

But when he died evidence had been found by county officials that he had been a "Satanist" who had "practiced all sorts of dark rites". That was all the real estate agent would say about it. Word had gotten out about that and a lot people seemed to believe the house was haunted or cursed or something.

For that reason, and because it had stayed empty until only recently for several occupants had died mysteriously or from accidents. An amateur Parapsychologist leased the place but had lived here for only a week, to study and write about the supernatural events going on in the house at the time.

Somebody came out to the house to deliver groceries and found the scientist dead.

Murdered.

The real estate agent wouldn't talk about how he'd been killed; nobody else would talk about it either. Some thought it was a lunatic- maybe the same one that had killed a dozen or so folks in this area over the past several years. Others believed that ghosts or demons had murdered the scientist, for the fact that the investigation ended after no trace of a suspect could be found.

So the ghost curse continued till this day. But she didn't believe in ghosts or demons or things that go bump in the night. That kind of supernatural stuff was for the irrational types. Also nothing weird had happened since she lived in the house. No strange lights or wailing or moans, rattling chains or loud mysterious footsteps.

She believed in psychotic killers, all right, but she wasn't afraid of them. She wasn't afraid of anybody or anything. She had been molested as a young girl, and raped when she was a teen. So she took her protection into her own hands and took several self defense classes and learned martial arts. And she was quite fluent as a fighter. Being victimized when she was young helped her to be strong and confident now.

And the area hasn't had any burglaries or vandalism or killings of any kind for a long time. Nothing at all. In fact it was boring living there.

Until now.

Well, if she wasn't alone in the house, it was because somebody human had come in. And she sure as hell knew how to deal with a human intruder. She pushed the blanket aside, swung her feet out of bed. She grabbed her flashlight out from the nightstand drawer. She made her way carefully across to the bedroom door, opened it a crack, and listened again. The same heavy silence. She pulled the door wide open, switched on the flashlight, and probed the hallway with its beam.

No one there.

She stepped out, moving on the heels of her bare feet. There were several other rooms along the hallway: two more bedrooms, a bathroom, and a spare room. She opened each of the doors in turn, swept the rooms with the light, then put on the overhead lights. Empty, all of them. She came back to the stairs.

Shadows clung to them, filled the whole first floor. She shone the light down there from the landing. Bare walls, the lumpish shapes of furniture, more shadows crouching down there everywhere. But that was all. No sign of anybody, still no sounds anywhere in the warm dark. She went down the stairs, swinging the light from side to side. At the bottom she stopped and used the beam to slice into the blackness in the center hall.

Deserted.

She arched it around into the living room. The windows reflected glints of light from the flash. She glanced back around at the heavy darkness, didn't see or hear any movement there. She reached out to flick the switch on the wall. Nothing happened when the electric bulbs in the overhead light came on; there wasn't anybody lurking in the living room.

Next she checked the dining room, nothing there either. She swung the cone of light past the staircase, into the center hall and then brought it back to the stairs and held it there. The area beneath them was a storage room set inside the wall. She stepped cautiously toward the door. She took a deep breath and slowly turned the door knob.

The back of her scalp tingled again. For a moment, she thought back to all the horror movies she had watched. Where the victim was alone in the dark.

But this was different. She had the comfort of lights to see. But that still didn't make her feel safe. For some strange reason the phrase from when she played hide-and-seek games as a kid popped into her mind.

Peekaboo, I see you.

Was someone hiding under the stairs? She jerked the door open and aimed the light inside. Nothing. She let out a relieved breath, backed away to where she could look down the hall again. The house was still graveyard quiet; she couldn't even hear the faint grumblings its old wooden joints usually made in the night.

It was as if the whole place was wrapped in a breathless waiting hush. As if there was some kind of unnatural presence at work here...

Screw that, she told herself angrily. *No such things as ghosts and demons*. There seemed to be presence here, all right- she could feel it just as strongly as before- but it was a human presence. Maybe a burglar, maybe a rapist, maybe even a lunatic. But human.

She snapped on the hall lights and went along the hall to the kitchen. But again as soon as the lights were flicked on she knew no one was in the

kitchen either. She glanced out the window to the rear porch. Still nothing. Where was he damn it? Where was he hiding?

Then she looked towards the cellar door. The cellar? She gazed at the door thoughtfully. It didn't make sense that whoever it was would have gone down there. The cellar was a huge room, walled and floored in stone, that ran under most of the house. But there wasn't anything in it except spider webs and stains on the floor that she didn't like to think about, not after the real estate agent's story about the Satanist who used to live here and his black magic hobby.

But it was the only place left that she hadn't searched. She crossed to the cellar door. The knob turned soundlessly under her hand. With the door opened a crack, she peered into the thick darkness below and listened. Still the same heavy silence. She started to reach inside for the light switch. But then remembered that there wasn't any bulb in the socket above the stairs; she'd explored the cellar by flashlight before, and she hadn't bothered to buy a bulb.

She widened the opening and aimed the flashlight downward, fanning it slowly from left to right and up and down over the stone walls and floor. Shadowy shapes appeared and disappeared in the bobbing light; furnace, storage shelves, a wooden wine rack, the blackish gleaming stains at the far end, spider webs like tattered curtains hanging from the ceiling beams.

She hesitated.

Nobody down here either, she thought. Nobody in the house after all? The feeling that she wasn't alone kept nagging at her but it could be nothing more than imagination. All that business about Satan worshiping and ghosts and demons, and that scientist being murdered. Psychotic killers on the loose might have affected her more than she'd figured. Might have jumbled together in her subconscious since she lived here and finally came out tonight, making her imagine a menacing presence where there wasn't any.

Sure that was it. But she had to make certain.

She couldn't see all of the cellar from up here; but she had to go down and give it a full search before she'd be satisfied that she really was alone. Otherwise she'd never be able to get back to sleep tonight. Aiming the light down again, she descended the stairs in the same wary movements as before. The beam showed her nothing. Except for the faint whisper of her breath, the creak of the wooden steps when she put her weight on them, the stillness remained unbroken.

The smell of dust and decaying wood and dampness assaulted her. So she began to breath through her mouth. When she came off the last of the steps she took a half-dozen strides into the middle of the cellar. The stone floor was cold and clammy against the soles of her bare feet.

She turned to her right, then let the beam and her body transcribe a slow circle until she was facing the stairs. Nothing to see, nothing to hear. But with the light on the staircase, she realized that part of the wide, dusty area beneath them was invisible from where she stood.

There was a mass of clotted shadow. The vertical boards between the stairs' risers kept the beam from reaching all the way under there. The phrase from when she was a kid repeated itself in her mind.

Peekaboo, I see you.

With the flashlight extended at arm's length, she went diagonally to her right. The light cut away some of the thick gloom under the staircase, letting her see naked stone draped with more gray webs. She moved closer to the stairs, ducked under them, and put the beam full on the far joining of the walls.

Empty.

For the first time she began to relax. Imagination, no doubt about it now. No ghosts or demons, no burglars or lunatics hiding under the stairs. A thin smile curved the corners of her mouth. Hell, the only one hiding under the stairs was herself.

"Peekaboo," a voice behind her said.

About the Author:

Jason Ryan Qualls is a very talented writer with a great imagination. He has the makings of a very popular author. You can see his work in other upcoming Static Movement anthologies.

Legend of the Black Revolver

Juan J. Gutierrez

A group of men huddled about a campfire, singing songs and telling stories to pass the time on a cold, autumn night. The strange hooting of desert owls within the darkness, kept the group restless. They spoke of where they had come from and what they had left behind.

All six men had lit a chuck for California.

"… and that's why I left. What can I say fellers, sometimes you don't know what's coming. Can't do anything about that, am I right?" finished Josias.

Each of the men had spoken, all except a silent greybeard whom had spent his time cleaning his Navy Colt revolver. Josias had noticed and had grown tired of the old man's idleness.

"Come on Gideon, that gun ain't getting any cleaner. Don't you know a song or story? A man that has lived as long as you have has to know a story. Creepy old night like this … a ghost story would fit the mood just fine."

The old man raised his heavy brows, but never looked up.

"Just might."

He finally looked up and stared deep into the weary eyes of his companions.

"Have any of you boys heard the legend of the black revolver? Just know that what I'm about to relate is a true story. One I find hard to believe myself.

"Once, there was a man called the Hessian. I don't know his real name nor why they called him that but what I do know is that he was an outlaw. He was always the victor in a fight, no matter what the situation or whom was at the end of his six-shooter.

"The day came, as with most outlaws, when he was captured. A group of Texas rangers ambushed him, while he slept. For his crimes, they wouldn't hang him by his neck, instead they decided to burn him alive. He died cursing them, forsaking their deeds.

"Having done what they set out to do, the lawman got on their horses and went on their way. One ranger was disturbed by what he had done and

turned one last time to see the remains and was shocked to see a great figure in black—Death himself, he'd go on to say—reach down into the pile of ashes and unearth the Hessian's prized revolver. It looked different, stained in a lusterless black, more like the ghost of a gun if such a thing is possible.

"The ranger told the others to turn back and see the dark stranger but whatever it was, had simply vanished. Only thing stranger than that was the fact that when they searched through the remains … *they couldn't find no gun*.

"From that day on, there have been stories and whispers about an unusual black revolver. Stories of duels, bank robberies, murders … but they all ended the same: Whoever was at the wrong end of that barrel, never walked away.

"Any man with that kind of power might find himself lucky, but this gun deals both ways. I've heard that the possessor eventually dies. They may be slain in their sleep, perish due to natural causes or simply aren't heard from again. Somehow, though, the gun is passed along.

"I never really believed the grim whispers, that is, until I found myself at the right place at the wrong time. A friend and I had ended up in a cantina in Dole Burrows, Texas a couple of months back. A drunkard sat at the bar that day and kept talking about the accuracy of the gun in his possession at the time. He wouldn't shut up about it, kept bragging and showing us this oddly stained revolver. We didn't know if it was the ale talking or just plain lies.

"A tall man in black—Spanish by the look of it—sat in a table behind the drunkard. They had their backs to each other. In the midst of the drunkard's slurred speech, the tall man suddenly rose from his seat, turned, pulled the black gun from the drunkard's holster shooting him on the back of his head and walked out."

Each of the men drew closer to Gideon, not wanting to miss a word. A strange yowl of a coyote in the distance frightened some of the men. Josias pulled his effects closer as he looked around the shadow-ridden desert.

"How … how do you know it was the same gun?" he finally asked.

"Not one month later, I heard a house burned down near Dole Burrows. A thief named Jeffery Matheson, passed through and found a black gun in the ruins. Went down to Waintown or so a friend told me. Josias, didn't you and Paco go down that way before meeting up with us?"

"Maybe."

"Anyhow, that boy died not two days later. Where the gun is now who knows? Sometimes, my friends, you know what's coming but you don't do anything about it. Men who own that gun learn the hard way. I will say this, if you boys ever find yourselves at the wrong end of a black revolver, you best pray to God in ain't *the black revolver*."

BANG!

A single shot rang out from a freshly cleaned gun, sending the men scattering into the night. Gideon burst into laughter as he saw the men stumbling through cacti and dry brush.

"Come on fellers, I was just fooling with you. Come on back!"

Gideon continued cackling and looked around the campfire but his eyes couldn't pierce the night. He saw no one and the night grew silent.

"Now come on back, fellers, I … I didn't mean anything by it."

The sound of rolling thunder seemed distant but approaching. Gideon looked at the night sky and saw nothing but twinkling lights amongst the darkness.

"Run!" yelled out one of the men, rushing towards him with horror in his eyes, "Gideon, run!"

Before the old man had time to react, his comrade fell to the ground, a hatchet protruding from the back of his head. As he got up, Gideon felt the clean point of an arrow just under his ribs. He dropped his gun and fell to one knee. A Native American jumped from his horse and drew a handmade knife. Red paint adorned the face of the stranger and he ended the life of a dying old man.

The Native American group dragged their victims back to the campfire as Gideon's slayer raised his cephalic prize. They searched through the bags, raiding what they found valuable. The stranger with red paint looked through Josias' bag and pulled out an oddly stained revolver.

He instructed his men to line the victims up side by side, for he wanted to test the accuracy of his new gun.

About the Author:

Juan Gutierrez lives in Sunland Park, New Mexico with his loving wife and daughter.

Lazaretto

Marija Elektra Rodriguez

“Come...closer.”

Grandmother is ill, and her voice is shaky. She reaches out her hand, skeletal and frail, and I feel a little scared to touch it. Her nails and lips have turned blue. She hasn’t got long now.

“Listen...carefully.”

She pulls me closer and whispers in my ear.

“Under the stairs, in the tiny room...that’s where I put her. She can’t stay there. It’s why we are all sick. Move...her.”

She makes a choking sound like she’s trying to spit out another word but can’t. Her voice fades away and the breath escapes her lungs. I’m terrified.

“Who’s in the room, Grandmother? Who?” I scream and shake her body, but she’s already limp. She was fine yesterday, caring for others in the ward. Now she’s gone.

I’m half-crazed as I run down the corridor toward the stairs. I ignore the cries for help and the screams of pain that come from the dozens of rooms that line the hall. They call it death’s hollow, the quarantine wing of the lazaretto where the infected are sent to die.

I fly down the stairs and nearly trip as I reach the lower floor. The tiny chamber under the staircase is locked, and I pound the wooden door furiously, so hard that my fists bleed. The door is old and decayed. As I hit it, part of the frame crumbles and the door gives way.

The room is almost completely dark. There’s light coming in from the hall, but I can’t see very well. My eyes adjust slowly and I stretch out my hands as I stumble in the darkness.

“Hello? Is anybody here?” I ask of the blackness, but no one replies. “My grandmother sent me to get you. Do you need medical help?” She must be the first patient who became ill if she was locked down here by herself. How horrible, trapped in this tiny room, in the darkness. I wonder how long she’s been down here.

My hand brushes against something and I instinctively jump back. I realize it’s just a bit of fabric, like the lace trim of a dress, and I feel a little

relieved. I reach my hand out again, and this time someone clasps it.

"Mama?" she whispers. She sounds very young.

Her grip is weak. She must be sitting in a chair, alone and ill in this horrible little chamber.

"My name is Annalisa. I'm going to take you to the ward." I place my other hand on hers in a comforting gesture, and give her a gentle rub so that she knows I'm a friend.

"I'm going to lift you up, and get you out of here." I speak slowly, and I hope she understands. I put my hands around her torso. She's so thin; I can feel all her bones.

Gently, I try to lift her out of the chair and take her in my arms. She's almost weightless, like a handful of feathers.

There is a loud crunching sound and the smell of rot hits the air. I try not to gag. She's been left to die in her own waste.

"It's alright. I've got you. We're going upstairs."

I rush toward the hallway with her in my arms. As I near the door, light floods my vision and my eyes readjust to the brightness.

That's when I look down.

It's not a girl in my arms. It's a skeleton.

I stare at her dumbly, thinking how pretty her white-blonde hair and lace dress are. The dress hangs limply in my arms, and my eyes search the spot where her legs should be.

I've ripped her body in half.

My foot slips and I fall to the ground. The door shuts, and the room is plunged into darkness.

Someone's screaming, and it takes me a moment to realize that it's me.

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"How long has this place been abandoned?" Elurra asked, breathing the question through chattering lips. This was what she lived for—ancient ruins gave her a blood-rush like nothing else could.

"At least two hundred years," Arturo responded, his voice shaky from the cold. "I have it on good authority that the castle belonged to some kind of obscure Italian noble family who all died mysteriously in the thirteenth century. It was converted into a lazaretto soon after."

He failed to mention that the "good authority" was a black market antiquities dealer he had met in a beach side bar on the mainland. There had been the faintest flicker of fear in the man's eyes when he mentioned the lazaretto. Arturo hadn't cared at the time; he knew Elurra would be wild with excitement once he told her about it.

They had been hiking for hours through the rocky mountainside of the *Isola di Sophia*, about six miles west of the Dalmatian coastline. The earth was coarse and difficult to navigate; the island wasn't on any of the local maps. The Adriatic air was glacially cold and the wind sounded like distant hounds baying at the moon.

"There's no risk of infection, right?" She threw him a mischievous grin, her emerald eyes glittering in the waning sunlight.

"No, of course not," he replied, his voice betraying his uncertainty. "Whatever disease was quarantined in the castle would have been wiped out after two centuries of solitude. Besides, broad spectrum antibiotics would take care of anything else." Or so he hoped.

The crumbling walls and steeples of the lazaretto seemed perfectly molded into the surrounding mountain. The road leading to the castle was almost non-existent, overgrown with thorny plants and man-sized grass. As he surveyed the landscape, Arturo felt a slight tingle of apprehension in his abdomen. The idea of spending a night in the lazaretto, a towering mess of decaying architecture, was making him nervous. But he suppressed the sensation and focused on Elurra.

She seems to be her old self again. She's finally put it behind her, he thought.

A navy dusk was descending around them, and the curtain of night seemed to touch the castle first, before it descended on the rest of the island.

"We need to clear the citadel walls before sundown, otherwise we'll be camping on frost by morning," Elurra cautioned. She readjusted her backpack, and her sleeping bag almost tumbled from its anchor at the base of her neck. Arturo steadied it with his free hand, brushing aside her auburn ponytail as he did so. The brief contact with her bare skin enticed him, sending small slivers of electricity through his arm.

She hadn't let him touch her since the miscarriage almost three months earlier. A part of her had died with the child, and she'd become distant, withdrawn. But here, on the crumbling threshold of the lazaretto, she was alive again.

“Do you hear that?” he asked, forcing her to turn and face him.

“Hear what? I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “Shouldn’t there be more noise? What about insects, or birds? Or even some bats?”

She smiled faintly and continued toward the ruins.

“The whole island’s gone dead silent with the dark.”

***

“I’m exhausted, we’ve been exploring for hours. Let’s set up camp in this room.” Arturo yawned loudly and threw his sleeping bag on the ground. A large plume of dust spread into the air, drenching the flashlight in tiny flakes of debris. “Where exactly are we, anyway?”

“I think we’re in the old contagion wing,” Elurra answered. “They would have quarantined the terminally ill in this ward.”

“I’ve got a surprise for you. Lie down and close your eyes.” Elurra compliantly spread her sleeping bag next to his and sat in anticipation, her small hands covering her eyes. Arturo reached into his backpack and produced three scented candles, a bottle of cheap red wine, and a box of Italian chocolates. He lit the candles and the scent of jasmine filled the air, making Elurra smile. “You can open them,” he said, leaning over to kiss her neck.

Elurra giggled and clapped her hands in delight. “I love it,” she gushed, and returned his kiss.

But their intimate moment was cut short.

There was a sudden scream from the hall, followed by the sound of muffled crying. Startled, they both leaped to their feet.

“Is someone there?” Elurra called, her features pinched with concern.

Silence.

Then the crying started again.

Cautiously, they both approached the door. Elurra was the first to peer outside, as Arturo pointed the flashlight down the dark corridor.

“Hello!” she called, her voice echoing through the emptiness and then fading into silence.

The sound of a young girl’s sobs broke the quiet. It was faint, but unmistakable.

The hairs prickled on the back of Arturo's neck. He waved his flashlight in the darkness. "Who's there!" he shouted.

"Be quiet, you'll scare her!" Elurra chastised. At that instant, the light passed across the form of a small child.

"There!" Elurra cried, her heart pounding in her chest as she snatched the flashlight from Arturo. She ran down the hallway, the light unsteady in her hands. "Little girl! Little girl!" she called, but there was no reply.

Elurra reached the end of the hall and turned to her left. To her surprise, there stood the child, at the top of a staircase.

Elurra gasped loudly. "You scared me!" she exclaimed, dropping to her knees and examining the girl.

The child wore a white lace dress and her hair was an odd shade of pale-blonde, the kind of color that belonged to a much older woman.

"Where did you come from?" Elurra asked, extending her hand to the girl.

"There's someone trapped under the stairs. We have to help her," the girl replied, ignoring the question. She turned and walked mechanically down the stairs.

"Wait!" Elurra cried after the child as she followed her. Arturo was calling out from the hallway, unable to see through the darkness, but she was oblivious to his cries.

"What are you doing in this place? Where is your mother?" Elurra questioned, feeling the stir of maternal instinct in her veins. The child continued to walk slowly down the staircase. When she reached the bottom, she turned and faced Elurra so that her brilliant eyes were lit up by the flashlight.

"I live here. My mother abandoned me," she said, her voice quavering with emotion. "In there." The girl extended an alabaster arm toward a small door under the stairs. "She's inside."

Elurra looked quizzically at the girl. "There's someone in there?" she asked with apprehension.

"Yes. You have to help her. She's trapped."

"How horrible." Elurra's hands flew to her mouth and she rushed to the door, forcing it open. The wood was old and badly rotted. The door opened easily.

Elurra swung the flashlight through the small chamber, examining the room. It was crowded with furniture, much of which was covered with dark

sheets and a thick layer of dust.

But there was no one there.

"I don't see her," Elurra whispered, and the young girl crept slowly to her side, taking her by the hand. The unexpected contact sent a brief spasm of fear down Elurra's spine.

"She's under there." The child pointed to a long, box-shaped object covered with a damask curtain. She began to pull Elurra toward it.

Reluctantly, Elurra removed the drape covering the box, and a small, stifled cry caught in her throat.

It was a coffin. A child's coffin.

"Promise you'll never leave me?" the child said in a gentle, almost meek voice. Elurra nodded instinctively. "Then open it," the girl commanded.

"Elurra!" Arturo exclaimed, standing at the entrance to the small chamber. His breathing was labored and sweat drizzled down his neck. "What happened—" he began, but his words were cut short.

The door slammed shut before he could enter the room. He pounded his fists against the wood and screamed Elurra's name, but she could barely hear his muffled cries.

"Open it!" the girl repeated, and Elurra stared at her dumbly, compelled to obey.

There was a crude cross etched into the wood of the coffin, the kind of thing a child might scratch with a rock. Elurra traced her finger over it before she lifted the lid and let it clatter to the ground.

With trepidation, she looked inside, the skin crawling on her arms and back. There would be a body, the small, decomposing body of a child. And the image would be burned into Elurra's mind; she would never be able to forget it. It would be the lifeless body of a small girl—of the child she should have borne—the daughter who had died in her womb.

But there was nothing there.

The coffin was empty.

Elurra let out a deep sigh. She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath.

There was a faint glimmer in the coffin. The light had caught something red and shiny. Elurra plunged her hand into the casket and retrieved a necklace with a small glass vial attached to it. She held it up to the light and examined it closely.

The young girl shivered and her head jerked violently.

The vial was filled with blood.

Elurra glanced from the pendant to the young girl and a scream caught in her throat. The child's face was decaying rapidly. The alabaster skin turned a putrid shade of green and the beautiful blue eyes were gone, replaced with vacant sockets.

The vial shattered in Elurra's hand and the glass seemed to move of its own accord, tracing a deep laceration down her wrist. She stared in shock as her own blood gushed from the wound, mixing with the infected blood of the young girl.

"Now we can be together forever, mother."

About the author:

Marija Elektra Rodriguez grew up in a delicatessen, with a multi-ethnic family, where pickling cabbage and knife throwing were taught at an early age. She would scribble stories on butcher's paper which would then be passed on to unsuspecting customers when they received their groceries. She is twenty-nine years old and currently lives in Sydney with her husband, el carnicero, her mastiff, and a one-eyed cat.

A Spectre On The Wire

B. T. Joy

Some stories have blood in them.

This one happened in Lynwyth, in the county borough of Newport, in a family seat of old renown, after the young men left and the old remained to serve the master.

In those days there was only one rule in service and Willard knew it well. His father had known it and passed it to him without ever having to resort to words; just as he'd passed it to Johnny in the same way. It wasn't something you had to speak about; not in service. It was obvious that the master of the house should have the say on how business is conducted under his own roof and his opinion was to be taken as law.

Still though, it was a mucky job. Dirty as the road; even now it was done. He was walking back to the hall now through the bracken with the grey threat of rain hanging in the cold November air and the steady sound of the crimson drips that fell each now and then from the hessian sack. *Throw the buggers in the Severn*: that's what the order had been. *Drown them*. But Willard saw no harm, while taking the master at his word, to fail to obey him to the letter. He'd never approved of drowning animals. His father had often done it with the dogs. The runts of the litter, usually. Tying them up together in a bag and just throwing them like so much dross into the current of the river. Cruel. That's what Willard thought. Though his father was never a cruel man in nature and, in point of fact, had probably never considered that the pups had their own suffering. But Willard certainly considered it. He'd heard them. The dogs. When he was a lad. All whining and yawping under that rough hessian. All stepping over one another to escape the rushing water. Then the horrific gurgling of their lungs filling with fluid.

No. Willard didn't drown animals. Not pups nor foxes neither. More humane to use the beaters' stick and break their little skulls. Three of them there were, in the den, and only a week or two old by the looks of it. Four including the vixen. He'd tied them up in the sack first of course. All together. Then he'd brained them quick and merciful; mother and cubs. But it was better that than drown.

Still though, upon reaching Lynwyth Hall, Willard did take a detour to the banks on the river. *Throw the buggers in the Severn*. That was the order. So in the Severn they'd go. He climbed down the shambling rise, under the shadow of the light-green Leylandii, and deposited the bloody carcasses of the animals into the flowing swim. A haze of shattered skulls and a wash of red tumbled away from him and snagged on the stones of the bed. He looked a moment at the ochre shimmer of their bodies settling in the chilling water. Then he folded the red-stained sack and pulled himself back over the roots and undergrowth. It must have been round eight o'clock by now and Willard knew there were a thousand jobs to be done before the day was over.

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Lynwyth Hall had an ancient history. The Romans had settled there under the reign of Claudius and the house stood on the site of their barracks. The cobble road too was built on top of the older Roman road and their where tales in those parts of divisions of men moving along that narrow pathway in formation; columns of crimson-cloaked bodies that disappeared upon the opening of window casements like a breath of mist burning to nothing in the dawn-time sun. Nonsense of course. Just old ghost stories about the times when this land was still contested and the invaders from abroad ran in pitch battle with the local tribes.

The house itself was erected in the time of Edward VI by the Earl of Pembroke, Henry Herbert, later Lord President of Wales, as a southern summer-home and a diversion from the pressures of office. Not surprising then that such a prestigious residence should pass, in modern times, into the hands of one of the richest men to be found within fifty miles of Newport. Mister Gwyn Buckley-Morgans. Indeed it was only the vast financial resources of the Lynwyth estate that allowed the household to function much as it had two years before. The war in France had crippled service in many of the great manor houses of the principality; and the nation in general. Some of the gentry were having to limp by with no chauffeur to speak of. With no under-butler or valet. And, in some extreme cases, gentlemen had been obliged to employ female staff to posts suited only for male estate workers. It was scandalous, but necessary to defeat the Krout.

Willard opened the door of the servant's entrance and stepped into the warm kitchen. Rashers of crisp bacon and beef sausages were sizzling joyously in the saucepan and Willard detected the unmistakable aroma of fresh eggs from the poultry coops. One thing was certain and that was that the Krouts and their bloody submarines had had little impact on Lynwyth Hall's grocery list. The master would never have allowed it.

"Good morning Mrs. Davidson," Willard said.

In a second pan she was simmering thick slices of dark English truffle in a coating of salted butter.

"Good morning Mr. Coots," She answered, "you drown them foxes?"

Willard paused. She gave him a busy glance. Just long enough to see the blood-stained sack he was holding in his hand.

"It's too soft you are, Mr. Coots," she said, attending again to the breakfast, "them foxes killed enough hens to feed the whole of Lynwyth. And the last one so close to Mycroft's coop no wonder the master's had enough of it. What is that bird again?"

"A rosecomb, Mrs. Davidson." Willard said.

"That's right. And you know how much the master prizes that bird." She said, turning the truffles "and there's you taking umbrage at drownin' a couple of old foxes."

"I *did* do it, Mrs. Davidson," he reminded her, "only I thought using the stick would be easier. They're at the bottom of the river as we speak."

She threw him another disapproving glance and then bustled after him.

"Stop making my kitchen look untidy then. Let me have that."

She took the bloody sack out of his hands.

"I'll get the blood out of it. Now go about your business Mr. Coots and let me about mine. Young Jenny'll be down to pick up this breakfast in no time flat."

No wonder she was afraid of foxes, Willard thought. She was as big a clucking old hen as anything out there in the coops.

He didn't argue though. She was right. There was so much work to be done before close of day. He took the key from his pocket and opened the door to the adjoining room; stepping into the small, windowless gunroom that adjoined the kitchens: his only place of work save the fields and riverbanks of the estate. He left the door ajar to keep the smell of the cooking in his nostrils.

***

Yesterday had been the pheasant hunt and, if Willard knew Mr. Buckley-Morgans, there'd be another in a few days. He'd been adamant to keep the numbers of the gamekeeping staff healthy enough to facilitate at least a weekly shoot and as head gamekeeper it had fallen to Willard to train the older men in their duties; some of them having never worked in the game profession before. Bloody Krouts. Trust them to start a war overseas and draw all the young lads out of their right occupations; leaving God knows how many fathers picking up the slack with no help in their old age from the very ones they trained for the purpose. Willard had trained Johnny for that. He was a strong lad and a crack shot in the hunt. Willard had taught him everything. To aim and lead the target. To load and handle the shotgun. To beat the bird out of the brush or to move stealthily across the land in search of a hare. To listen to the master in everything he says. And now, at nineteen, Johnny was about the most capable assistant gamekeeper a father could ask for. Except only that he was in France, trenched in and skirmishing with the bloody Kaiser's stormtroopers.

Willard sat down on the paper strewn desk by the shotgun racks and rifled slowly through the mass of documents. And there it was. Just where he'd left it. The game book.

He opened the red-leather cover and turned to the first empty page.

Hunt, he wrote in the margin. Then the date: *November 2nd, 1916.*

Pheasants: 27

Grouse: 16

Ptarmigan: 12

Brown Hare: 5

He breathed out frustratedly. Just scraped sixty animals. It was more than disappointing. He leafed back over the pages of the book. Last time it was twenty-two pheasants. The time before even worse. All year they hadn't managed more than thirty-five.

"Abysmal..." Willard whispered to himself, "bloody abysmal."

But what could he do? Before the summer of 1914 he'd had twenty men under him. Fifteen trained beaters and five assistant gamekeepers. Now, despite Mr. Buckley-Morgans' attempts, the number was slightly less than that and the expertise was nowhere to be seen. Everyman was as old as

Willard; their health was waning and their ability to conduct a hunt was bordering on laughable. Christ what he wouldn't have done to have a handful of those young, vibrant men back again. What he wouldn't have done to go pheasant hunting with the likes of them. To see wings flicker just a moment on the foggy grey sky before the shot sounds and the feathered body thuds to earth. To see a man hunched and silent; aiming his line of sight at a heedless hare. To see Johnny. Just to see him. To see him as he was; standing in the clouded air of a new November, gun cocked and resting on his strong right arm, and blue eyes like chips of icy glass, Willard's own eyes, scanning the rolling bracken for any hint of life.

He turned back, as though turning the clock, to the pages of peacetime. To the pages that he'd filled, and Johnny had filled, before the mess with Germany. His fingers hooked on a page and he threw it open. His eyes burned. The letter. Of course, he'd left it in the game book so as not to lose it and ended in losing it anyroad. He picked it up and opened it again; as he had when it first arrived. It was dated the 3rd of September but he'd only received it three weeks ago. Letters from France were slow in coming.

He opened the page again and stared silently at his son's handwriting. These were the last words he knew for certain his son had thought and so he read them again, as he had more times before than he could count.

Dear Father,

I am not permitted to write to you in Welsh as the officer in charge of the mail is from Liverpool.

It is September as I write this and the rain has been torrential now for more than a week. I'm knee-deep in water most days and several of the lads are feeling it in their feet and coming down with fevers. I wish I could write with better news but the fact is that it seems the war has at least six months to last. I had gladly hoped to be home two Christmases ago, as did the other lads, but it looks as though the season will pass us by again.

To be brighter, there are plans for a big push coming soon. I can't say more as it will only be cut from the letter but we are attempting to break through the German lines and end the stalemate. If this is successful I may return home sooner than expected. I feel badly for you gamekeeping with no assistance and I look forward every day to taking up my old duties at Lynwyth.

I must stop writing now. The front is a tiring place. Please find enclosed a letter for Jenny. Tell her she is never far from my thoughts.

Your loving son,
Johnny

"Johnny," Willard whispered.

Then something from the kitchen broke his concentration.

"Right my girl," Mrs. Davidson was saying, "get this breakfast up to the master at once before it gets cold if you please."

Willard rose and came to the door of the gunroom. Jenny was standing in the kitchen taking the tray from Mrs. Davidson; in her hands already, ironed flat and dry, was a copy of both the South Wales Daily News and The Times newspapers. Mr. Buckley-Morgans liked to keep abreast of both regional and national affairs. For him it was every Welshman's duty to take the larger view; what with it being so easy for a small principality to lapse into provincial thinking. It was for this reason that he did as much as possible for the war effort. Jenny looked up at Willard with those large, brown and tired eyes of hers. Too young to be so tired. Willard thought it every time he looked at her. But this morning there was something else as well; something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Perhaps the girl was just feeling poorly.

"Jenny," he nodded.

"Mr. Coots," the girl nodded back.

Then as quickly she was gone. Out of the kitchen and up the plushly carpeted stairs to Mr. Buckley-Morgans' bedchamber.

"That girl seems in a haze the whole time," Willard commented, half to himself.

"Too much foot-draggin' you ask me," Mrs. Davidson replied, "mornings are early in service and she's had time enough to make peace with that."

"I think she misses Johnny, Mrs. Davidson," Willard said, "they were firm friends when they were children."

"Johnny and his like are best were they are, Mr. Coots, and that girl best get used to the idea," Mrs. Davidson pressed, she was looking out the papers for lunch even as she spoke, "young, fit lads. We need them in France fighting for the country. Mr. Buckley-Morgans'd be the first one to

tell you that. Times've changed Mr. Coots. I never thought I'd live to see the day were innocent folks would be squat in shelters in the dark while bombs fell random out of the sky."

Willard didn't answer. How could he? The master of the house should have his say on everything under his roof. That's what Willard had taught his boy. The master's opinion was to be taken as law. And Mrs. Davidson was right. Mr. Buckley-Morgans was a tireless campaigner for the war effort. He believed strongly that every young man had a duty to fight in France.

"Mr. Coots!"

Willard reacted quickly to the sharp voice in the kitchen doorway.

"Ah, Mrs. Kramer. Can I help you?"

Mrs. Emilia Kramer was an Englishwoman, from Coventry, and had been the housekeeper at Lynwyth for about as long as Willard had kept the game.

"Mr. Buckley-Morgans wishes to speak with you. Immediately." Mrs. Kramer informed him, "I believe he wishes to discuss the next pheasant hunt. There is to be a guest."

"Guests!" Mrs. Davidson looked wide-eyed at the housekeeper, "Mrs. Kramer I hope you don't mind me saying but the kitchen staff need advance notice if there's to be guests!"

"Guest, Mrs. Davidson," Mrs. Kramer said, "the singular... not the plural."

"Even still."

"Besides," Mrs. Kramer elaborated, "I don't believe the gentleman will be staying to supper... light refreshments for after the pheasant hunt will be quite adequate. Mr. Coots. We don't want to keep Mr. Buckley-Morgans waiting. Do we?"

"I'll attend to it at once," Willard answered.

***

By the time Willard came to the upper floor bedchamber Jenny was already leaving; having served Mr. Buckley-Morgans with his breakfast of beef, bacon, egg and truffles.

"Jenny."

He nodded to her again. But this time she didn't nod back; she didn't even look at him. She looked pale and wan and terribly, terribly ill. Something in her face even looked frightened. He watched her as she walked away unsteadily down the hallway. Missing Johnny, he decided, worried for his safety.

He shrugged the idea off. No time in a working day for dark sentiments. Then he braced himself and knocked softly at the door.

"Come!" The response came; and Willard entered.

Mr. Buckley-Morgans was sitting up in bed cutting slices of beef sausage with his solid silver utensils and depositing each morsel into his large, red mouth. His eyes were down and on the task; large bulging eyes that gave the man a stern and somewhat dangerous appearance.

"Come in, Coots," he slurred through a mouth of beef, "don't be shy, man."

Willard stepped a little closer.

"You wanted to talk to me, sir."

"Yes, yes," Mr. Buckley-Morgans replied, "I did."

The portly gentleman leaned back on his goose-down pillows and smiled at Willard.

"I'm driving into Newport this afternoon and I'll be gone for the remainder of the day," he said, "I'm meeting an old chum of mine from Oxford... he's a London chap and I've wrote to him singing the praises of our local wildlife... and the gamekeeping staff too..."

"Thank you, sir," Willard nodded, "each man of us is dedicated to the job, sir."

"I know it!" Mr. Buckley-Morgans smiled, "oh, by the by, did you drown those bloody foxes!?"

"They're in the river, sir." Willard answered.

"Good!" The master tore a rag of bacon with his knife and shovelled it onto his tongue, "bloody greedy buggers had enough of my hens, what! I don't want anything happening to Mycroft, Coots. Nothing! Best damn rooster in the county. We've got to protect what's ours, Coots."

"Can I assume you'll be taking in the pheasant hunt with your guest, sir?"

"You can!" Mr. Buckley-Morgans spat, pointing at his gamekeeper "and, listen Coots, I want a good show! My guest is a gentleman of the highest calibre! The highest! He wants a weekend of country pleasures,

Coots. Country pleasures. And I intend that he receive it. Francis Calhoun, that's the gentleman's name. Cuts a figure in politics. Very influential. One of my kind of gentleman, Coots. Dedicated to the war effort, you know. Real brick. It's that kind of dedication to the cause that singles out those with breeding from the chaff, what."

Mr. Buckley-Morgans continued to feed himself with the warm meat. Willard averted his eyes. *Chaff*, he thought.

A moment passed and then the master looked up from his breakfast.

"Oh," he said, rising from bed and pulling on his quilted housecoat, "not to say it takes a gentleman to contribute!"

He moved towards Willard; clapping a fat hand on his shoulder.

"Even the common man can give something in his own way" He smiled warmly, "take your boy, John, wasn't it?"

Johnny, Willard thought.

"Now there's a fine lad. A son to be proud of." Mr. Buckley-Morgans leered at Willard with those bulging white eyes, "I remember the posters like it was yesterday, Coots, I remember them pasted up all over Newport. I remember when the penny dropped. When I realised the great contribution I could make. Good God, in gamekeeping alone, twenty young, fit lads of good fighting age. *Can you sacrifice the convenience of servants to give your country soldiers*!? That's what the posters asked! That was the rallying cry! Good God! Chauffeurs. Groundsmen. Under-butlers. Valets. Gamekeeper's assistants. Half a regiment of men right here under my nose."

Mr. Buckley-Morgans laughed; his red mouth bulging wetly.

"I remember, Coots," He grinned, "telling them all that first time. Telling them I was letting them go. Letting them enlist. There was such a clamour of anticipation in this house, Coots. And I remember your son. Your John. At first he wasn't sure but he warmed to the idea. Now look at him. Over there in France teaching the bloody Boche a lesson. We need more patriotic men, Coots. In all the classes... that's why it's important we show my guest a good show... show him the nation's appreciation for men of character."

"I'll prepare everything, sir." Willard assured his master; anxious now to be away.

"Good man!" Mr. Buckley-Morgans slapped Willard hard on the shoulder, "go to that right away. I'll return by car round nine o'clock tomorrow morning. I want the first bird by ten!"

Willard nodded.

"By ten," he said, "of course."

Mr. Buckley-Morgans smiled again and then moved back to bed to finish his breakfast. Willard felt invisible once more, as though being ignored, and he took the feeling as his cue to leave.

***

After telling the gamekeeping staff about Mr. Calhoun's impending visit Willard set them to working down at the hatcheries on the southern fields of the estate; the winter would be hard and the game-chicks would need extra care to prevent the losses of previous years.

He himself remained in the gunroom; prepared a few orders for the post and filled a few from the butcher-shops of Lynwyth and even a few in Newport.

He wasn't making much headway. In the end he just gave in and sat there rubbing at his raw eyes. He could remember the posters as well. Anaemic wall after anaemic wall pasted over entirely with those same emphatic words. *Can you sacrifice the convenience of servants to give your country soldiers*? It wasn't only Johnny who didn't like that. Other lads had taken umbrage too. Instruct your men to enlist? Let them go? Who were the owners of estates to let people go like letting go of a piece of chattel. Who were the gentry to *instruct* common folk to enlist? That's how the young men saw it, in the beginning, and Johnny had been no exception.

"I'm not going." He'd said at first, "I don't care what he does. I'm not going to fight because another man's decided to volunteer me."

"You'd rather people thought you were a coward? Is that it?" Willard remembered saying the words, "Johnny, listen lad. You don't want to be here forever; seeing nothing of the world. Join up. See France. You'll be back with us for Christmas dinner. That's what the War Office says. For Christmas dinner Johnny."

Johnny had shaken his head in the strangest way.

"Because he tells me?" There had been such puzzlement in that voice.

"Johnny," Willard had put his hand on his son's hand, "under his roof the master has the final say. His word is the law."

Willard looked now at his old hand; resting on the cover of the game book. Skin lined and dry as a leaf in autumn and missing intensely the heat

of the young man's hand that once rested under it. That once, on a holiday by the Severn estuary, had clutched through tiny mittens at his palm, with such trust and comfort, as they walked up over silt banks marked by tidal passage to the cider orchards where Willard drank his half-a-pint and Johnny ran round the sunlit bodies of the apple-trees; unbound by time and brimming with boyish joy.

But it was November now and the threat of rain, the same that fell relentlessly over the trenches of France, was hovering grey in the heavy skies over Lynwyth. The year was old and Willard was old and still there was no letter from the Western Front.

***

As evening closed in on the estate Willard finished with the paperwork and went out with his fencing tools to check the parameter. The fence was rabbit proof and so should have been fox proof too but Willard knew the animals had to be getting in somewhere. It was necessary to kill them. The magpies and the crows. The rats and the weasels and the foxes. But it was also necessary to keep them away from the game in the first place. He was out in time to watch Mr. Buckley-Morgans' car take off down the path of the old Roman road; out towards Newport. The white haze of the automobile lights created the strangest optical effects against the dull bruise of the hour. It was almost possible, for a moment, to see why folk had reported seeing those ghostly legionnaires marching onwards, to battle perhaps with the Silure warriors of ancient South Wales, and then disappearing before the eyes like a looped fragment of history. Willard thought on the strangeness of that just a moment before shrugging it off.

Then, after the master left, the work went on. Seven o'clock came and went and the sky slowly dimmed to starless blackness. In the end Willard found a few likely spots where the predators had burrowed in; wild with the scent of the birds in their coop. He filled the channels with soil and stones; packed together tightly to impede passage. Then he firmed up the wires that ran as a barrier between the deep posts. Willard looked along the line of the fence. Thinking. He was sure there were more places where the animals could break through. He had been going to continue. The dark never bothered him. Years of working outdoors does wonders for night-vision. But just then, light somehow turning on a switch, the long expected rain

began to fall and with Willard a fair ten minutes from the shelter of Lynwyth Hall. He stood up and hefted his tool-bag onto his back; pulling his quickly dampening jacket around his neck. He turned, readying himself to walk at as good a pace as possible back to the hall, when, all at once he was stopped in his tracks by the strangest sight.

Right along their, south of him and hard up against the fence, the sleek shape of a man was standing; staring motionlessly at the patch of ground around his feet. Willard frowned and watched the man carefully for long moments. He never moved, not a muscle, and the rain that must have been soaking him to the skin washed over him without the slightest protest of the body. Willard had no idea who the man could be; for, at a distance, his physique didn't match any of the older men in his own staff, nor even that of the groundsmen. No other staff member would be out in this abysmal squall and he could not be a poacher from the village; for such a man would surely attempt to avoid detection and not stand openly in the field not caring a farthing for the watchful eyes of the gamekeeper. Willard was still frowning in deep puzzlement as he started to walk through the grey bombardment towards the weird shadow at the fence-side.

"Excuse me, sir!" He shouted as he came near, "Excuse me! Are you lost, sir!?"

No answer, though the man, if not deaf, had surely heard every word.

"Sir!" Willard tried again, "This is a private estate!"

No answer. Not even a flicker of movement. The shadow just stood; staring down it its feet.

"Your trespassing!" Willard shouted more from fear than authority.

In his urgency to make his point Willard lost his footing; his boot-sole slipping roughly on a patch of sodden mud. The heavy bag he carried pulled him down and his body struck the ground. His line of sight and his vision of the strange intruder was lost for the briefest instant. His eyes snapped back at once from the wet grass to the place where the man was standing; then they widened in disbelief and something approaching panic.

Where the man *had* been standing there was nothing now. Just the bare fence and the patch of soaked earth that he'd been staring into. Willard looked left and right. Rising from the ground and frantically scanning the entire periphery. He had been hunting these grounds for forty years. He could stalk a white mink through a snowstorm. It was *impossible* for a man

to escape him. Especially one who made no move to get away. And yet the shadow was nowhere to be seen.

Willard approached the section of fence against which the stranger had been leaning. And, as he touched it, a fresh horror welled up from the pit of his stomach. Something wet and thicker than rain had come off on his hands when he held the metal wires and when he looked at his palm he recognised at once the sickly red smear. The fence where the man had been leaning was slick with freshly lost blood.

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The night was restless; the rain gave no quarter and Willard's dreams were deep and bloody.

In his mind a massive, ochre fox was trying to break through the line of the fence. It had dug a hundred channels in the clagging rain-soaked mud and its fur clung with smears of brown corruption. The paws with which it clawed at the heavy earth were black and gangrenous, open sores and the bruises from bludgeoning bloomed red and angry across its skull and there was a gurgle of river-water in its frequent fevered roars. It wanted to get back to its nature. That fox. And in the depths of the dream Willard knew that. It wanted to eat and drink without restriction; to feel the beauty of being an animal at liberty again and free on the fenceless, trenchless planet. It wanted its family and the burrow it called a home. It wanted to run among the yellow apple trees of a cider orchard; young and spotless and unafraid.

It tore and tore at the packed soil and broken stones Willard had forced into every break in the line. But the job had been done too well; the stagnancy and the stalemate of the creature's every desperate attempt was painful to watch and palpable in the air. Then, at last, it stopped digging and, wild and frenzied, began to push its massive body through the wires. It pushed and forced itself beyond the logic of physicality. It pushed so hard and so insistently that its rotten skin began to peel off with the effort. Willard watched, breathless with fear, as a beast left behind its muscles, its drowned lungs and its twisted entrails. Still pushing. Still pushing. Its bowels and its stomach falling wet and heavy on the wrong side of the fence and its ripped and ruptured skin snaking like a separate animal into the open world beyond; where it hung itself on the razor-sharp wires, bleeding human blood onto the cold metal.

***

Willard's eyes opened at the tinny rattle of the Westclox alarm going off on his small bedside table. He stopped the noise with his hand and then looked around the bare walls. Six-thirty shadows, blue and cumulous, hung in every corner and, in his mind's eye, he could still see the dream play out. The crazed fox flaying itself on razor-wire and the thing that had not appeared in the nightmare, but which germinated at the core of his limbic brain, producing the fear of those brutal images. The thing he had seen the night before; hunched against the wires and leaving the stain of itself behind. Christ, Willard thought, had that been a dream as well.

He closed his eyes. No. It had been real enough. A man standing alone in the rain-harried field, not moving, not attempting to move. He saw it again. That shape. That sleek, young shape and, in the recess of his mind, he almost saw the face of the shadow; staring down, white and lifeless, at the burrowed ground.

He opened his eyelids again; sharp and deliberate. A moment more and he would have seen that awful face. *No time for such dark thoughts Willard*, he thought to himself. *You're getting old and sentimental and your imagination's like a little boy's. Stop it Willard. Just do your duty.*

And the duties of the day seemed unending now. Soon Mr. Buckley-Morgans would return. Soon he and Mr. Calhoun would want to stride out onto the estate with their guns primed and ready; have the beaters beat the brush and flush the startled pheasants into the misty air.

He pulled the bedclothes away from his old body; swinging his feet out onto the cold boards and, after dressing quickly in his hunting togs, he made his way down to the kitchen. Once there he found that Mrs. Davidson had already prepared him a simple breakfast of canned meat, toast, eggs and laverbread.

"Mrs. Davidson," he said, sopping up the vivid yellow yolk with a scrap of toasted bread, "tell me, your quarters have the southern aspect, have you seen any strangers on the grounds these passed weeks?"

Mrs. Davidson gave the gamekeeper a strange look.

"Strangers, Mr. Coots?" She replied, "I should say not. Why? Do you reckon we got a poacher?"

Willard dropped his food and looked into the mid-distance. Thinking.

“Not a poacher, no,” he said distractedly.

“Who then?” Mrs. Davidson pressed. “You catch a sight of someone?”

Willard looked at her gravely. Then shook his head dismissively.

“Some drunkard I expect,” he assured her, “probably cutting through the estate to shorten his journey. To avoid the rain.”

“I expect you’re right,” Mrs. Davidson rejoined, “weather was fierce last night. I could hardly catch a wink for it hammering on them panes.”

She had put the ominous suggestion of a trespasser on the grounds firmly out of her mind and Willard could tell. The way Mrs. Davidson saw it everyone had their part to play at Lynwyth and nocturnal interlopers were no concern of the female staff. Willard watched her blankly as she rolled out a white mesh of caul on the chopping board and transferred onto its centre a roasted breast of mallard from her saucepan. The lining of a pig’s stomach and a red hunk of duck-meat. The whole affair would be wrapped in pastry and cooked until it whined. It was Mr. Buckley-Morgans’ favourite breakfast.

“Yes,” Willard said, quietly and to himself, knowing that he was being ignored, “A drunkard. Lost on the road. Trying to avoid the rain.”

***

With the beaters and the gamekeepers gathered and the shotguns primed and ready for use Willard took the master’s own fowling piece, and a second reserved for Mr. Calhoun, to the likeliest habitat; the mounds of brownish brush and the towering Leylandii that surrounded the hatcheries near the southern field. From here he could see the patch of fence where the drunkard at stood the night before. The cold wind made him shiver but the light of morning made the story fit together better than it had in the fierce squall of the previous night.

Even the blood on the wires made some kind of sense. Lynwyth Town has its brawlers like any other part of the country. Like as not the man had taken a tumbler to the face and some long-suffering wife of the village was waking up this morning with similar stains on her pillowslips.

Willard looked concernedly at his wristwatch. The hour of Mr. Buckley-Morgans‘ arrival was fast approaching and he had yet to gather the dogs. And so he told the staff to remain on site and doubled back to the

kennels. There he spoke with the kennel-master and took out four of the master's best Springer Spaniels. They would work in two teams that day and rotate the dogs to keep them rested. Willard knew that the master would want a decent kill to impress his friend from Oxford.

After collecting them he walked them back towards the tree-line; each animal snuffling at the ground, breath steaming and red tongues slobbering into the bitter atmosphere. On his road back, dogs tugging him along, Willard could just see the first glint of Mr. Buckley-Morgans' automobile lights wheeling up over the driveway, and across the Roman road, toward Lynwyth Hall.

***

Mrs. Kramer had Jenny take the gentlemen's coats directly upon arrival.

"Welcome to Lynwyth Hall," she nodded curtly to their visitor; and then said nothing else.

Mr. Francis Calhoun removed his hat to reveal the sparse strawberry-blonde of his hair; the same worn out shade as his thin moustache. He had weak, aquiline features and sunken grey eyes. He looked at Jenny as he passed her his outer clothing.

"Charmed." He said.

"If you please, sir," Mrs. Kramer drew the attention of Mr. Buckley-Morgans, "a light breakfast has been prepared in the dining room. Would you care to partake before the pheasant hunt commences?"

"Good God, I should say so," The words slurred from his large mouth, "I'm a tad peckish myself. What about you Francis, old man!?"

"Ravenous." Mr. Calhoun dipped his head at Mrs. Kramer and then stole another glance at Jenny, as though anticipating that she would be the one to serve.

"If you'd like to follow me gentlemen," Mrs. Kramer said ceremoniously; leading them through to the dining room by the righthand flight of stairs.

Jenny followed and no sooner had the housekeeper pushed open the doors than Mr. Buckley-Morgans pushed passed her and into the room.

"Country pleasures, Francis, old man!" He shouted, "Country pleasures, you know. What do we have Mrs. Kramer!?"

He hefted his weight into the chair at the head of the table and Mr. Calhoun slinked into the adjacent placing.

“Mallard en Croute, sir,” Mrs. Kramer primly informed him, “served with porter.”

“Delightful,” Mr. Calhoun smirked.

Jenny was already dishing the meals out onto the bone-china crockery. Several breasts a plate and a helping of buttered truffles and wild mushrooms.

“Hurry up, girl!” Mr. Buckley-Morgans was salivating with anticipation, “we’re starving over here!”

She quickened her pace; Mrs. Kramer’s sharp and disapproving eyes snagging on her every move and Mr. Calhoun’s gaze never far from her back. When she’d transferred the meal from the hotplate she brought each of the gentlemen his own helping and then filled their glasses with thick, red porter from the decanter on the dining table.

Mr. Buckley-Morgans seized up his silver cutlery and broke the back of the pastry. Blood oozed, wet and oily, from the breast and swam on the plate in a pinkish mire.

“Eat up, Francis!” He said, “you’ll need your strength for the kill. These birds were shot right here on the estate.”

As Calhoun began to eat Buckley-Morgans tore away a chunk of red flesh with his knife and fork. His mouth slobbered over the fibrous meat as he shoved it inside. His lips expanded and contracted and expanded larger than before; chewing, softening, swilling the meat around inside his massive face.

“Best duck in the county!” He spoke with his mouth full, moistening his lips with the animal’s grease, “Best duck in the bloody county!”

“Indeed,” Calhoun said, “you have much of what is good here.”

Jenny shifted weakly on her feet. The feeling was rising in her stomach. The feeling of wanting to vomit again as she had earlier that morning. Mrs. Kramer caught her eyes with a threatening look and the girl soon straightened up.

Mr. Buckley-Morgans’ red mouth undulated. He was forcing more of the animal between his lips. Two parcels of duck-meat were gone and he was even then slicing into the third. He wiped his face with the nearest napkin; leaving stains of slick redness on the pressed linen. Then he began to slurp at the porter.

Jenny closed her eyes. She couldn't help it. She couldn't watch him anymore and the sickness was building in her like floodwaters touching the lip of a dam. And, even with her eyes closed, she could still hear him. Wheezing sounds of pleasure from his fat, swallowing throat.

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The servants stood in gaunt dark shapes against the frosty ground; the Spaniels off the leash already and weaving in about their heigh boots. They stood waiting; each man with fowling piece in hand and an additional shotgun, loaded and ready, sat on the rest a foot or two away. When the pheasants broke it was best to save as much time as possible.

Mr. Buckley-Morgans and his friend Calhoun arrived around a quarter to ten; their stomachs filled with mouthfuls of mallard and keen to claim a few more birds from the Lynwyth stocks. The master addressed Willard at once:

"My gun man!" He demanded and Willard presented him with the weapon, a particularly low-gauge to add a punch to every shot.

"Remember," the master said, "I want the first bugger by ten!"

Willard heeded his master and made a gesture to the beaters; who in turn led the dogs up and into the Leylandii trees at the periphery of the field. The assistant gamekeepers readied their guns and Willard stood by the spares reserved for his master and his master's friend; ready to turn them over at once when the shot of the first was exhausted.

Mr. Buckley-Morgan flashed his white and bulbous eyes on the swaying topmost branches of the dark trees; resting his gun at the line of the mid-ground.

"I must thank you for this, Mr. Coots," Mr. Calhoun smirked, "it's rare I am afforded the opportunity."

Coots looked at the gentleman. Something about his sceptical, sunken gaze told the gamekeeper the man had never been thankful for anything.

"No more'n my duty, sir." Willard nodded his head.

"Yes," Calhoun smiled, "and we all must do our duties; especially in these times."

Willard stared at Calhoun in a way he hadn't stared at a gentleman in his life. He was talking about Johnny and Willard knew it in a moment.

Calhoun couldn't have understood but he was talking about Willard's boy over there in France.

Suddenly there was a rip-roaring clamour from the tree-line. The dogs bayed and bellowed at something in the brush and the beaters began whooping and thrashing at the bracken with their long, thin sticks. The branches of the trees sang with the skittering play of feathered wings and all at once the pheasants burst out from the summits of the wood and scattered into the leaden air.

Mr. Buckley-Morgans levelled his gun above his head and the snapping explosion of the first shot hit its mark. The bird continued to fly, gut full of shot, and Mr. Buckley-Morgans fired again. The second aim was just as true and the first pheasant careened down in a silent arc and landed broken on the hard ground behind the ranks of the hunters. Dead by the stroke of ten. Everyone was shooting now. Left. Right. Leading the flock across the dome of the sky. Shots sounded in a wild barrage of violent noise and the animals tumbled and thudded on the earth.

The sound of gunfire tore each time through Willard's head and, like it never had before, the frequency of the bombardment confused him and caused his stomach to churn with uncontainable anxiousness. Some birds were flying low now and the hunters had spread out to find the clearest line of sight. Everything was shamble of shapes and movement and bloody yelling. Willard's eyes darted over it all and between the familiar scrambling of the hunters he saw, each now and then, a figure appear and then disappear. A figure leaning hard against the fence; and bleeding there. A figure hanging on the brutal wires and staring with untrammelled attention at the barbarity strewn around it.

"Damn it man!" Mr. Buckley-Morgans was bellowing angrily at Willard, "my damned spare man! My damned spare!"

Lost in his vision of the spectre on the wire Willard had forgotten his charge and the master had run out of shot. At once he snapped to and presented the spare fowling piece. The master grabbed the shotgun violently from his servants hands.

"If your getting to old for the hunt, Coots, I can have you replaced!" He spat, "don't think I can't!"

"Mine too man!" Calhoun shouted, "my spare!"

Willard rushed. Ashamed at the time he'd lost. Ashamed at keeping the masters waiting. He grabbed up Calhoun's second piece and offered it to

the man; moving back quickly and beginning to load the others as efficiently as he could. *The masters word is law Willard*, he forced himself to think. *You must remember. That's what you taught your boy.*

The flight of the pheasants grew sparser and the hunt slowed in pace. Willard continued to keep the master and Calhoun fresh in loaded weapons and the birds continued to thud against the ground. Must be thirty-five now. The best hunt in weeks.

Willard wouldn't allow himself to be distracted again and scarce even looked at the haunted section of fencing where the figure hung. Though from time to time still the shape appeared like a black smudge on his peripheral vision. He kept to task and didn't mind it. It was an illusion in any case. Something brought on by too much worry and by the strange and rattling sight the evening before of that drunkard from Lynwyth.

In the end he got back to the rhythms of the hunt and wasn't even put off when the postboy passed, right along the old road, with letters marked for the attention of the gamekeeper.

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They had carried the dead pheasants back to the hall. The twenty staff holding each two birds by their scraggy claws. There were butcher-shops aplenty in the surrounding area with a licence to sell game and Willard knew the birds would be required to fill orders.

They hung the birds in the kitchens and Willard set the men to clean and re-store the guns as, meanwhile, he took the dogs back to the kennel-master. On his return the staff had taken back to the grounds and the windowless gunroom was again silent and empty.

He went inside and sat again at the bench by the gun-racks; pulling out the game book and turning again to the first white blank page.

Hunt, he wrote. *November 4th, 1916.*

Pheasants: 44

Mallards: 9

Grouse: 12

He blinked and let the pen rest on the desk. He turned back over the pages of the past. To years ago. To 1913. To 1912 and 1911. To the time of a hundred pheasants. Of scores of grouse and ptarmigan and a dozen hares resting skinned on the sink-ledge.

Death doesn't grow weaker. And Willard knew it. Death is just as vast from one year to the other. The war had not augmented him, or lessened him, but drew him off to France. Away from the fields of game. Away from the skies thick with wheeling pheasants. Away to the trenches of the Western Front where larger game ran wild and frightened as any hare across the open ground and where weapons of more fury than any shotgun roared daily in the chemical air.

The young men were gone and the animals killed at Lynwyth diminished year on year. But in what way did Death compensate abroad and how close was that clammy hand to the face of a handsome Welsh boy who'd once played among the apple-groves of the Severn estuary.

There was a slight knock at the gunroom door which pulled Willard directly from his reverie. He looked up at once to see Mrs. Davidson standing there; looking down on him.

"Some letters came while you were out, Mr. Coots," she said, "they're marked for your attention."

He put out his hand.

"Thank you, Mrs. Davidson," he said, "likely orders from the village."

"Likely," Mrs. Davidson nodded, handing over the small bundle, "and looks like we'll have the game to fill them. The hunt seemed to go well enough."

Willard nodded.

"Well enough," he repeated.

He waited for the cook to leave before starting on the letters. He was right. Three of the letters had been orders from the butcher-shops; mostly for poultry, but a few enquiring after the availability of game. Willard dealt with them slowly and tiredly. For some reason this hunt had taken a toll on him that no previous had ever exacted in his forty years of service.

The fourth letter was different.

Mr. Willard Coots, it was marked.

Lynwyth Hall, Lynwyth

Newport

South Wales

He opened the letter carefully and began to read. His eyes sharpened on the page and he lifted himself heavily from his desk; standing and

continuing to scan the words. His chest plunged into his stomach and his face drained of all colour.

He collapsed to his knees; arm straining on the bench, hand and letter shaking alike. He shut his eyes tightly and tried hard not to shout out. In the darkness a young man was hanging lifelessly from a tangle of metal wires.

***

He read the words again. Again. And again. His eyes could see them. His mind understood them. But something deeper wouldn't let them in:

Dear sir,

I regret to inform you that your son Pte. John Morris Coots, No. 89429 of The Third Battalion, Welsh Regiment, was on the morning of September the 15h, 1916, killed during action.

Death occurred without suffering and was instantaneous.

The regiment had been posted at Courcelette and were engaged in breaking through the German lines in a sustained infantry and artillery attack. Significant damage was successfully made to the enemy before retreat was sounded. Your son was caught on a length of barbed wire and volleys from the machine guns made it impossible to retrieve him.

Your son has given his life for his country and was never a man to be in dereliction of duty. I am assured this knowledge will be a source of great consolation to you in this time of your loss.

Yours, in sympathy,

C.O., The Third Battalion, Welsh Reg.,

There's an aloneness to news like this.

Everyone had come around. Mrs. Davidson to apologize for bringing the letter. Mrs. Kramer to pass on the commiserations of the staff. Even Mr. Buckley-Morgans put in an appearance saying that the boy was a hero and that he'd not be forgotten.

Keep a stiff upper lip, Coots. The boy wanted to go out there. It was the boy's choice. Now he's made the ultimate sacrifice. Best sacrifice he

could make. And, Good God, we'll honour him for it.

The whole of Lynwyth would know by now and Willard had been given the next few days to compose himself before his duties should be taken up again. Before the next orders would come from Mr. Buckley-Morgans.

The night drove in over the estate and Willard sat in the windowless gunroom with the letter of commiseration open on the desk before him. A letter recording a death on top of the game book that recorded less and less deaths each season.

All the dying is happening in France, Willard thought tiredly. *Here the gunfire is weaker and kills less birds. While in France six-hundred rounds a second burn up in a fearful tangle of unstoppable noise.*

He looked at the letter again. Surreal. Silent but saying so much. And in that moment Willard knew the word had come to him long before but down from more ethereal channels than he ever thought existed.

The spectre on the wire. Not a drunkard lost in the rain but the dislocated ghost of a young Welsh squaddie hanging their in the wires of the night just as his corporeal body hung on the silver barbs that surrounded the British lines like a snarl over the foreign fields. Willard had never believed in such stories. They had always been some idle joke. Or some idle-minded superstition; spoken, half to entertain, in the pubs when drink got flowing. But now he knew it was true. Tonight a legion of men was marching along the ancient road and the spirits of the grey pheasants, whose bodies lay stiffening in the dripping sink, winged and turned on the hunched back of the wind.

He looked southward, though he could not see through walls, and knew that Johnny was waiting for him; out there on the wire. The thought made him almost peaceful and he laid his hand, eyes closed, on the terrible letter; imagining again the feel of Johnny's hand beneath his own, that last time they spoke about war and duty.

And then, again, he heard himself say it.

Would you rather people thought you were a coward? Join up, Johnny. See France. You'll be back with us for Christmas. That's what the War Office says.

Johnny... listen... under his roof the master has the final say. His word is the law.

***

There was another knocking at the gunroom door.

Willard looked up from the letter. *Not more sympathy,* he thought. All he wanted was to be left alone a few more hours; to think and to grieve. But the life of a grand house like Lynwyth does not afford servants the luxury of solitude.

"Come in," his voice grated on his throat.

The door opened and Willard became suddenly attentive as he saw Jenny, standing there at the threshold. She'd been crying.

"Aw, love."

He stood and opened his arms and she went to him. They held one another for a moment, the years of isolation and standoffishness dissolving and old man and girl returning to something of the previous state they'd shared in, the old familial closeness that Johnny had carried with him, even into rooms of strangers, and then carried away from Lynwyth the day he left for overseas. Jenny cried now into his shoulder and Willard only wished to cry; keeping strong for the girl and cwtching her closely in his arms.

"I knew he was gone," Willard said, "my father said he heard his father by the bramble patch. He was round my age then and his father'd been dead a year and a half. Called his name out, he did, in there among the brambles. And I saw Johnny. Clear as you like. A shadow on the wire..."

He pulled her away from him and looked deep into her young and troubled eyes.

"That's how he died, Jenny. That's what the letter says. Caught on the barbed wire and the sound of the machine guns..."

Willard trailed off; growing weak and moving unsteadily back into his seat. Jenny followed him; clutching at his hand. It was only then he saw the letter she herself held tight as a crucifix.

"I had to speak to you, Mr. Coots," she wept, "I wouldn't bring more heartache on you for the world but I had to tell you about me and Johnny... before I leave."

"Leave?" Willard frowned.

"I'm to be dismissed," she said, "Mr. Coots... please don't think the worst of me... everyone thinks the worst of me... but I'm to have a child."

Willard looked at the girl in astonishment. It was the last thing he'd expected her to say.

“A child? But... Jenny... who?”

“The father isn’t important, Mr. Coots,” she stopped him from asking, “and the baby’ll be adopted out first chance I get... that’s not what I came here to say. But I wanted to tell you for a long time, Mr. Coots, about the other child I had. The one that was born before I came into service and that father gave to the priest...”

“Jenny,” Willard shook his head, “what are you telling me?”

The girl allowed the letter to brush the old man’s hand like an offering.

“You’ve always been kind to me, Mr. Coots,” she said, “you treat me more like a daughter in those early days than my own father did. But what I’m telling you know is about your own, true blood, about Johnny. And I know it will be hard to believe me. So, please, Mr. Coots, read the letter. Hear what Johnny said.”

Willard looked down and felt the pang of pain that was attached to that tiny, well-kept and nightly read sheet of water-damaged paper. It was a feeling somehow akin to the one attached to the letter he’d received that day; though somehow deeper, older and more mournful even than that, like a private ache carried through hours and days of silence.

He took the letter and opened it. The letter. Yes, the letter that had once been enclosed in another addressed to him and written months before from a dull lighted dugout abroad.

Dearest,

Shells are falling again in the west. But tonight I feel the war is at a distance. I feel so because between the volleys I snatched an hour of sleep and dreamt of you.

In my sleep I saw us that first time together, in the shadow of the Leylandii, with the Severn flowing peaceful on the rocks. I remember you that evening, Jenny. I remember more than I can put here for other men to read. Thinking that you too remember makes that night alive, even in this abysmal night, and that thought sustains me through every trial and feeling of hopelessness.

I will come home my darling. In dreams I already nightly cross the sea. But, one day, please remember, I’ll come to you in body and we’ll begin again the story we started those years ago. I’ll see you again, love, under

Welsh evergreens, far from this bloody, foreign place. And I will not ask you now- my Jenny- what I'll ask you then. But I promise, if you wait for me, I am determined that we will never be parted again.

Yours,

Johnny

The letter lowered in Willard's hand and he looked with awestruck sympathy at the girl on her knees before him. How could he be so blind? How could he have imagined a romance so established to be only childish affection?

"The baby," he said, "the one you spoke about, the one born before you came here... Jenny... can it be true? Do I have a grandchild?"

Jenny looked at him through sincere tears. Then, knowing he would not doubt her, she nodded with unburdened relief. Willard breathed out.

"A little boy," Jenny said, and Willard knew her pain from the way she spoke, "a beautiful boy... I called him after his father... but he could be anywhere now; have any name."

"I don't know what to make of this, Jenny," Willard said. "You're pregnant now by another man. But you've kept the letter. Why? Were you not in love with Johnny? The way he was with you?"

"For me there was only one man," Jenny answered, "and that was your son."

"Then how?" Willard said. "Was it loneliness? Jenny. Tell me. Who is the father?"

Jenny shook her head.

"Mr. Coots," she cried, "there's things I can't let on about. Thing's that'd do me more harm."

"Jenny..."

"Mr. Coots!"

A third harsh voice entered the room and the two servants looked up at once to where Mrs. Kramer stood by the open door.

"I apologise for having to intrude on your grief." She observed the niceties, then she turned on the girl, "Jenny. You are to take a bottle of brandy to the study. The master and Mr. Calhoun have freshly run out."

Jenny looked at the woman as though in search of some flicker of a pitying attitude. But none was found. Mrs. Kramers face was stern as ever.

"Mrs. Kramer," Willard said, "can't you see the girl's distressed."

Mrs. Kramer cocked an eyebrow instinctively.

"I'm sensible that the whole of Lynwyth is distressed by the news, Mr. Coots," she said, "you have my deepest sympathy. But we must carry on with our duty to the master. Mustn't we?"

There was a moment when no one moved. *Our duty to the master*, Willard thought. The duty Johnny followed; overseas and into his grave.

"Come now girl," Mrs. Kramer ordered, "wash your face before you go. The master will not want to see you in that condition."

Jenny rose helplessly and cast Willard one last desperate look as she left the gunroom; trailing off unsteadily to serve Mr. Buckley-Morgans and his gentleman friend.

"The girl tells me she's to be dismissed," Willard charged Mrs. Kramer, "is that true?"

Mrs. Kramer stared down at Willard dismissively.

"She's got herself a bastard it would seem," the old, sharp-faced woman said, "we can't have that sort of immorality at Lynwyth... it would reflect badly on the household."

"And who's the father?" Willard demanded, "why is she afraid to tell me who the father is?"

"Mr. Coots!" Mrs. Kramer drew Willard daggers. "I have only the most regretful feelings for what has happened to your family but I remind you not to forget your place in the scheme of things. It would be a dishonour to your son's memory. He after-all never stepped beyond his station in life. He did his duty to this country and this house. Have a care that you do yours."

"I have done mine, Mrs. Kramer," Willard matched the woman's look black for black, "and if I live another twenty years... which I don't think likely... I'll not be able to make amends for that. I told a young man who wanted to live for his own sake in peace and happiness to travel off into death and misery for the sake of duty to another man."

"To his master, Mr. Coots," Mrs. Kramer said, "to his superior."

Willard looked at the love letter he still held; at the beautiful words a young man sent back home to his girl.

"Johnny had no superiors."

He spoke the words to himself. But even that was enough to offend Mrs. Kramer.

"Mr. Coots!" She chided, "I will put this unfortunate behaviour down to the recentness of your bereavement. I suggest you speak in this manner with no one else. Good evening."

Willard did not answer. In truth he was too angry to speak again and in moments Mrs. Kramer was gone.

Willard sat long after she left and listened to the steady hammering of the precipitous night. His life had become a puzzle wrapped in a puzzle. He saw again the spectre swaying on the hooks and barbs. Bleeding from a hundred bullet wounds onto the bare metal. The blood flowed like port wine from the neck of a bottle and soaked into the gaping red mouth of the southern field. Yes. The gaping red mouth. The twitching, wet and ugly maw that seized, chewed and devoured carcass after carcass; lump of bleeding flesh after lump of bleeding flesh. He saw Mr. Buckley-Morgans, his own fat mouth ordering other men's sons into military service. He saw Calhoun, bird-faced and wretched, and full of self-righteous expositions.

Then again he saw Jenny. Jenny who'd loved Johnny, who said she'd known no other man but him, but whose womb was growing heavy now with the foetus of some faceless father. He saw her then; before the war. And he saw her now; face drawn and eyes stripped of spirit. He saw her trailing, as though a ghost herself, through the dank and sunless halls of Lynwyth; brandy bottle in hand and on course for the study.

"Jenny," he breathed. "Why?-"

Then it struck him and the thought seized at the innards of his chest like a spectral fist. His eyes widened in shock, terror, guilt, outrage, everything at once. His mind whirred as he stood himself up on shaken legs; trying to disprove the terrible imagining that had risen in his mind but only seeing the pieces fall more clearly into line. Then an urgency coursed like the adrenaline of a hunt through every channel of his veins.

He reached up and seized his shotgun; rushing out of the room and into the dark halls of the house.

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He was breathing hard and laboured by the time he reached the study. Then, not stopping, he opened the door and entered.

The room was massive, like most rooms in the house, and those inside scarce heard him as he passed through. The place was dull-lit and Willard could hear the play of joyous voices drifting from the far wall where the chaise longue stood by the towering bookshelves.

The poor light made what was happening there difficult to discern. He clutched the shotgun closer to his chest and endeavoured to make out the night cloaked figures that roiled and twitched on the chair. *More ghosts*, he thought. *More unreal shapes*.

But then he saw it clearly and the fleshly certainty of it struck him to his core like the pang of a bullet.

"I told you, Francis," Mr. Buckley-Morgan slobbered, "I told you this would be a night of country pleasures."

Willard forced himself to believe what he was seeing. But the image was too frightening to admit. Calhoun had Jenny's arms held roughly behind her body. Her thighs on his thighs. Her head was turned away and into darkness. Her blouse had been opened to the stomach and Mr. Buckley-Morgans' fat, grease-stained mouth was twitching and sucking at her uncovered breasts. The blubber of his lips expanded and contracted, expanded and contracted, expanded and contracted, pulling her young, supple flesh in and out of his mouth. His hand was moving in the darkness between her legs.

Willard aimed and fired. A series of leather-bound encyclopaedias burst into a flurry of torn paper and the wild noise threw the men from the chair. Mr. Buckley-Morgans' bloated body hit the ground and Calhoun threw Jenny to the floor after him; rising himself and staring at outrage into Willard's eyes.

"How dare you!?" He screamed.

Willard pointed the gun.

"How dare you?"

"Now, come on, Coots," Mr. Buckley-Morgans rose, holding out his hands, "it was just in fun, now. We weren't going to hurt the girl."

Willard looked, almost calmly, at Jenny. She was shivering with fear and holding her clothes shut over her chest.

"Jenny," he said, "go pack your things and tell the chauffeur he's to drive you to Lynwyth tonight. Take what you need for board from the gunroom."

“Gwyn!” Calhoun said, “are you going to let this servant give orders here? You, man. Consider your position.”

Again Willard aimed the barrel at the thin and aquiline man.

“You’d do best to consider yours, Mr. Calhoun.” He said. “Mine isn’t of consequence to me. Jenny... Go.”

Jenny rose and moved quickly out of the room. Willard just stared in disgust at the human filth congregated around him. Was this what Johnny died for? Was it on the orders of these swine that his good son ran through a hail of hostile fire?

“Now, Coots. Listen.” Buckley-Morgan was speaking so desperately that slavers had begun to speckle his chin.

“If I hear more words from you sir,” Willard said, “I’ll shoot you clean through like one of your bloody birds.”

“You’ll be hanged, Coots!” Calhoun assured him.

Willard looked at him tiredly.

“And so I should be,” he answered, “for what I did to my boy.”

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The November rain was lashing the ground in a scatter of percussion as Willard walked his captives at gunpoint out into the southern field.

“On your knees.” He ordered.

Buckley-Morgans fell down at once; blubbering and begging. But Calhoun stood firm, pushing his authority to the last.

“All this for a little whore,” he smirked, “Christ knows how many fucking filthy underlings she’s opened her greased legs for... you expect me to kneel in the frost for that filthy bitch... you expect me...”

The second shot of the night cracked the back of the steady raining hush and Mr. Calhoun fell as a screaming weight to the ground by Buckley-Morgans. His red hand was fumbling at the ruined stump of his foot as spurt after spurt of the gory flow poured onto the hungry field.

Willard’s eyes didn’t move. In the periphery of sight he saw his son; uniform torn by bullet-holes, leaning against the far fence, a spectre on the wire, swaying its dead weight back and forth on the pliant wind.

“My foot!” Calhoun screamed, “you bastard! You fucking bastard!”

“There’s many an amputee in France, Mr. Calhoun,” Willard said, “your loss is nothing special.”

Calhoun stared at the servant with such hatred. Then he made his move.

"You can go to hell!" He roared, rearing up like an animal on his ruined appendage and attempting to seize the weapon from his assailants hands.

Willard was faster; emptying the shotgun with a thunderous blow.

Calhoun landed, face down on the frosted grass, a spatter of brain and blood and skull carpeting the ground around his head like a pound of raw minced flesh.

"Please!" Mr. Buckley-Morgans wailed and shuddered on his knees, "Good God! Please! Coots! No, Willard! Willard! Please!"

Willard was already loading the shotgun with two more shells.

"No point in fighting this, sir," he said blankly, "I've been hunting these fields for forty years."

"This isn't a hunt, man!" Buckley-Morgan cried, "I'm a human being!"

"No," Willard said, "Johnny was a human being... Jenny... the girl you raped into pregnancy then tried to get rid of... she's a human being... you're just a ball of waste... eating everything... pulling everything good in and swallowing it..."

"Please Willard," Buckley-Morgans begged again, "I'll make good... the girl won't want for money for the rest of her life... please!"

"Liar."

"I will!"

"Liar!" Willard shouted, "damn you for being a liar and damn me for believing you. Now get up and run."

"What?"

"I said run, pig," Willard's eyes were mad and mechanical, intent on one thing, "my son is up there on the wires of the fence... if you can get to his feet you'll be out of my range... now get up!"

Willard pulled the fat man to his feet and pushed him bodily into movement.

"Run pig! Come on, pig!" He shouted, "give me something to shoot at! Give *me* some country pleasures! Come on pig! Come on animal! Run!"

Buckley-Morgans began to shamble quickly away from his unhinged servant. His massive bulk through him this way and that as he tried to zigzag over the open ground.

“How does it feel, sir!” Willard shouted after him. “How does it feel to be in no-man’s land!”

He levelled the shotgun and lined up the master’s swaying guts in his sight. He closed one eye and held his breath. Then he squeezed the trigger.

Buckley-Morgans let out a high-pitched yawp as his body careened to one side; a bloated discharge of carnage flopping out from his shattered torso and landing with a heavy wetness on the hard earth. He fell to his knees and continued to scream in the most abject pain. Willard blinked and rested the shotgun on his arm; beginning slowly and silently to stalk after his prey.

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The line of blood was dragged ten yards into the grey grass; Buckley-Morgans’ distended stomach smudging the ground with gore as it moved along. From where Willard stood, above the master, it appeared he was no longer human at all. But a massive gastropod that had been caught under a stone on an autumn morning. He was dragging his intestines behind him and his tar-black hand, awash with gut-blood, was trying desperately to push the innards back into the flaps of his torn, white skin.

From only a hundred feet away Johnny, or the ghost of Johnny, watched as Buckley-Morgans struggled for life. Willard looked up. From this range he could see his boy’s face again. Just as he’d wished to. Only now it was drawn and white and dead and the sightless eyes in their blackened sockets possessed none of the spark they did in life.

I’m sorry Johnny, Willard thought, knowing the boy could hear him where he was. *For what I did. For what I taught you to be.*

Willard wiped rain and tears both from his eyes. His face was cold and expressionless as he looked back down on his kill.

“Please!” It was screaming, “Please! Please! Please! Please!”

After awhile the cries made no sense as words; only as the throaty whining of a gunshot beast, something that had to be put out of its misery. He pushed the cold metal of the hunting shotgun roughly against the back of Buckley-Morgans’ head.

The last shot was followed by the silence of the rain.

About the Author:

B.T. Joy is a Scottish writer who received his honours degree in Creative Writing and Film Studies in 2009. His work has appeared in journals in Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Ireland, the USA and Britain. He recently qualified as a High School English teacher and has worked previously in many fields; as an administrator, a writing mentor, a farm labourer and a salesman.

Bloody Marilyn

David Frazier

A specter held my heart
Within her hands,
Blood still pumping through its veins.
I lay upon the earth so cold,
Fast approaching death.

A beauty named Marilyn
Blonde and curvy.
Lips red, hips round and full
Breasts bountiful,
Caressed my spot.

A mysterious vapor
Stole my life from me.
Took my heart
From my body,
Watched it die.

Stopped pounding
She ate.
Blood covered her mouth
Like a red veil.
Smiling, she winked, then vaporized.

About the Author:

David Frazier wrote a short story for the book *Kindred Voices 2,* published by the University of Massachusetts. He has written poetry for editor/publisher James Ward Kirk of Indianapolis,IN and is featured in his books: *Indiana Horror 2012* and *Indiana Science Fiction 2012. Harvest Time: Inwood Indiana* printed a poem of his. His poems will be printed in several *Static Movement* anthologies. The *Workers Write Literary Journal "Tales From the Concrete Highway"* will print his poetry. The *Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine* and *30 Day Poetry Challenge Anthology* have also published his work.

Field 12a

Matthew Wilson

Last year, my friend, Richard Blake was left land by a well off uncle. Being out of pocket on bad investments, he took a chance on growing wheat. A city boy sure all he had to do was lay down fertilizer and nature would take care of the rest.

His letters told his new neighbours welcomed him with open arms, till he noted where he worked. The few men who remained drinking in the bar did not pull their punches.

That land was bad. Before their forefathers were born, it was used by witches to slaughter cattle. Offer worse to long dead Gods. Men spoke of missing children but Richard shot back some prepared questions like an eager interviewee looking to impress a prospective boss.

Richard could count. Knew what came after twelve but like a superstitious hotel manager, the last owner simply renamed his patch 12a. No one took rooms or even floors marked 13. None but witches whose bodies remained in the ashes. Finally the villagers had enough. Caught the hags one by one as they fled to the woods and dragged them back.

Toward the fire.

Men made jokes, instructions that Richard should not set his tractors forks too deep as he furrowed for seeds in case he uprooted black Cat skeletons entombed with their masters.

Richard would not be put off. Back home, men waited for money, would go as far as break his legs for his cheek of not settling poker debts. In the space of one year, when the wheat grew fat he had the chance to wipe the slate clean and more.

At least his letters home started well.

The work was good, always a sickly child preferring books and traversing nights like Owls, he found the transformation to a bulked up boxer appealing. At last he had something to take his mind off anxieties. At home, no bank would hand him loans, now he was in charge of tractors worth thousands.

He took to manual life like a fish to water.

Then someone nailed a dead Cat to his house.

His letter laughed off the matter, but I registered an undertone of unease. A small hope this dark cloud would pass. It did not. Fire from the fields woke him, but running there with water buckets clutched in each hand he saw no sight but the freshly turned sod.

The only noise the irritated croak of crickets feeding on seeds.

There was no fire. Things were as they had been for three centuries. Beside himself. He was a new element in the field, his notes wondered aloud if he had disturbed something best left be. I assured him but photos he enclosed to calm me only heightened my concern.

Sleepless nights left him guant, more fearful in the eye than when various crime lords fired bullets through his window to frighten money from this human stone. I wrote back if I should come down to bolster his courage. A few drinks and talk of old, better times.

His next letter gave a blank refusal, he made note his arrival there had whipped up more hostility in the field than he'd led on and further human contact might cause the whole patch to open. Swallow the house down whole like a hungry mouth.

By summer I got the idea my friend was driven quite mad by the pressure of success his move down south demanded. If things went foul he would be shown no mercy on returning. Tail between his legs.

Nightly, Richard said women rose from the earth, dancing naked in the moonlight. Some retained their skin and others went all natural, skulls jiggling, barely held on by the meat the worms thought foul and left behind as they girated. Mocked him as he watched from the window, frequently fainting, laying in fever upon the bed.

I read enough. Again, I insisted I help him out - demanded to take pressure off. His next letter was not expected till the sixteenth, I told the postman to intercept and ship them back to it's sender.

Before he shot me down again I caught the next train heading south. It was nightfall, raining when I entered the small farming village and got reports in the bar that Richard was dead. Slit his throat two nights before in the bath. Poor sod. I decided to stay a while and sort out his effects, make some money from the farm to give the money lenders so they'd not move onto his poor mother.

I do not like it here. Despite their original sympathy, the locals made their feelings of my arrival known. Some sicko nailed a Dog to my door. I

have called police, but they refuse to come. And since women dance naked at my window I am quite unwilling to walk away.

They are beautfiful in their beastly nature. Nightly they come closer to my temporary lodgings, asking me to come out and play. Their sweet voices drowned out only by the clacking of their shoulder bones hitting their broken vertebrae like xylophone.

My teeth itch to that ghastly music. A knock asking for entry. They leave dead hair on my pillow, let me know they can get in here any time.

Sometimes I look at the razor blade that took Richards life and think he may have made the right decision. Sometimes I think about that a lot.

About the Author:

Matthew Wilson, 29, is a UK resident who has been writing since he was very small, and recently these stories have escaped into Static Movement, Pill Hill Press and Bank Heavy Press.

Call Him Bastard

Tim Tobin

"Bastard."

For forty years Ralph Chandler recoiled from that label. Janet used it to damn him, to humiliate him, to intimidate him and even to frighten him. But now Janet lay dying in the very hospital where she worked.

And her husband exacted his revenge.

"Can you hear me, Janet," he asked.

Dr. Janet Chandler's eyes fluttered open and he felt a slight pressure on his hand.

"Good, because I have something to say and I want this to be the last thing you hear before you die. I'm glad you're dying. You've put me through hell for forty years and I hate you for it. At least I'll have a few years to live in peace. Now, die, bitch."

Ralph Chandler felt another squeeze and he jerked his hand away.

The old man called the family back into the room and his son and daughter took up the vigil. Hiding a smile, Chandler stood at the end of the bed and watched life drain out of his wife.

***

The scent of lilacs and roses wafted through the funeral parlor. A recorded dirge softly played from discrete amplifiers. Friends and relatives of Janet Chandler milled around teary eyed, hugging him and shaking his hand. After an hour the funeral director announced private time for the family to say goodbye.

The director showed them into a small room where the remains of Janet Chandler lay in her expensive casket surrounded by flowers and mementos. One by one the six grandchildren knelt by their grandmother and each placed a daffodil, her favorite flower, on her body. Amber, the four year-old sobbed until her mother ushered her away.

Chandler watched his son and daughter shed a tear and for just a moment, Ralph felt a stab of loss. But then he remembered.

He remembered the nagging, the fights, the name-calling. Janet used sex as a weapon to get her way and constantly humiliated him. Memories of days and then weeks of the silent-treatment washed over him.

"Bastard," she called him, every day, every week, every month, for forty years.

Ralph Chandler knew exactly why he hated his wife.

When his turn came, the room quieted. The phrase "deathly quiet" crossed his mind. Someone turned the music off and the murmurs ceased. Chandler's family stood along one wall in the still room. His armpits dampened and the hairs on his neck stood up. A queasiness in his stomach turned him slightly green.

He took a quick peek at the body intending to leave as soon as propriety allowed.

The dead woman's eyes shot open. She raised her left hand and motioned for Ralph to come closer. A keening sound erupted from his lips and he tried to move away from his wife. Instead Chandler moved his ear next to her mouth. The corpse said a single word.

"Bastard."

Ralph opened his mouth to scream. Instead the room spun and he vomited his breakfast all over himself and the body. Chandler's family helped him up after he fell to the floor on his face.

***

Instead of kicking up his heels and dancing, a sick Ralph Chandler went through the pretense of sorrow with family and friends until he finally returned home after the reception. And he returned with a commitment to rid the house of Janet.

On the way Chandler bought a six-pack of beer and popped a top as he tackled the refrigerator. "No more cooking in this kitchen," he thought and tackled the perishables first. Lettuce, peppers, tomatoes, and potatoes all went down the garage disposal until the machine roared in displeasure.

He drank his second beer emptying the spice cabinet, an easy task compared to the perishables.

"Who needs more than salt and pepper?" he asked himself.

Chandler lugged a trash bag to the door and popped his third beer.

Janet's closet became a three beer job.

“How can one old broad have so many clothes?” he groused as he dumped dresses, suits, blouses, and shoes into black trash bags. By the time he finished the fifth beer, ten bags blocked the top of the stairs.

Chandler closed the door to Janet’s closet and sat down to catch his breath and decide what to do next. Although anxious to rid the house of all remnants of his dead wife, the old man needed a break.

He opened the last beer and sipped it as he fell asleep in his recliner.

***

Dawn broke with a slight chill. Ralph Chandler shivered as he struggled up from the recliner. He recognized a slight hangover from the beer and moved towards the bathroom and an aspirin.

The open door to Janet’s closet caught his attention and he saw all of her garments still hanging there. Chandler shook his head and looked again. The clothes hung in the closet, the same clothes he put in trash bags the night before.

A new box of bags lay unopened on the floor.

“Hell,” he thought. “I must have drunk more than I remember.”

He made his way to the kitchen. He disposed the fresh food the previous night and the spices sat in an open trash bag. So Chandler made a pot of coffee, perused the headlines in the morning newspaper and then went up to throw away Janet’s clothes.

“For the second time,” he said aloud.

Again he filled ten bags and lugged the first one down the stairs. He went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Chandler stumbled on the salt shaker and fell to the floor when he saw a fully stocked spice cabinet.

He crawled to the sofa with a splitting headache.

***

A thunderclap brought Chandler around. Except for lightning flashes, darkness surrounded him. His wristwatch said ten o’clock and he assumed that he slept all day.

The old man struggled to his feet and felt his way to a lamp switch. The click of the switch sounded like a pistol being cocked but no light came from the lamp.

He fumbled in the dark to the kitchen and managed to retrieve the flashlight from the junk drawer. The stabbing light carved eerie shapes in the gloom. The house made sounds Chandler heard a thousand times but they seemed more ominous.

Sweat poured off of his head into his eyes. Yet his stomach felt icy cold and his bowels were loose. Desperate for fresh air, he lunged towards the front door. A blast of thunder welcomed him to the storm.

The wind increased until the rain became horizontal and ripped into him like a shotgun blast. Soaking wet, Chandler turned the door knob to go inside when a fierce lightning bolt brought down his huge elm tree, crushing his car.

Back inside Chandler wrapped himself in a blanket and fell asleep still wet.

***

The morning songbirds woke Ralph Chandler from a troubled sleep. His clothes were still damp from the storm but he wanted to check on his car before he changed. He snapped a few pictures using his cell phone and called his insurance agent.

His neighbor, Pete Meredith, stopped on his way to work.

“Ralph, what on earth happened? Asked Pete.

“The storm last night, I guess,” replied Ralph, trying to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

“Storm? Last night? You must have been dreaming, pal. And, again, I am sorry about Janet.”

***

Ralph Chandler sat in the living room thinking about the weirdness since Janet died; his hallucination in the funeral home, her clothes and the spice cabinet and then the storm that wasn’t.

“Certainly ghosts do not exist,” he argued to himself. “Janet’s spirit does not haunt our house.”

That left Chandler with an explanation more terrifying than a ghost. A brain tumor caused the hallucinations. He thought of the irony and unfairness if he dropped dead less than a week after Janet died.

He reached for the telephone to call Dr. Phillip Maguire, Janet's old boss and his long-time physician. Before he picked up the phone the room changed, as if someone, something, watched him.

A dozen photos in the room shifted so that Janet stared directly at him from every direction. Her hazel eyes in their wedding picture on the mantel pierced his soul. The collage from their trip to Hawaii with the Meredith's rotated ninety degrees on the bookshelf. Photos of Janet with the grandchildren turned to accuse him.

"A tumor," he said aloud. "Must be it. I have to get to the hospital."

When Chandler stood every photo of Janet became airborne. Some soared like delicate birds around the downstairs. The large wedding picture rotated like a helicopter. Others darted directly at him, averting a collision at the last second.

The old man fell to the floor and he let out a yelp when his sore knees hit the hardwood floor. His terror overcame the pain and he crawled towards the front door. The framed photos gained speed and hurled themselves at the walls. With a distinctive thunk, each embedded itself in the plasterboard.

The helicopter landed and leaned against the front door. Janet's hazel eyes blazed red and her mouth curled into a sneer.

"Bastard."

Ralph Chandler collapsed a foot from his front door and lay there for two days until Pete Meredith let himself in to check on his elderly neighbor.

Dr. Maguire ordered a brain scan that came back negative.

"Just the stress of your loss," he assured his long time patient.

So Chandler faced the impossibility of a reanimated Janet Chandler.

***

Chandler walked around Janet's grave. The mound of dirt was undisturbed. The marble headstone would be ready in another week or so. Until then a small brass plaque identified the grave.

He shoved his hands in his pockets as he paced.

"Janet?" he called. "Are you still in there?"

The sound of an approaching engine answered him. Another mourner, he assumed, here to visit a loved one. A U.S Mail truck pulled to the curb and stopped. Morris Clyburn, his dead mailman, stepped out carrying an

envelope. Clyburn retired a few years earlier and dropped dead of a heart attack not six months later.

"What, what, on earth are you doing here," stuttered Chandler.

"Why, Mr. Chandler, you know we deliver right to your door."

Chandler grasped the envelope and his late mailman drove around the bend and disappeared. His name appeared on the envelope in Janet's impeccable cursive handwriting.

His hands shook so hard he barely managed to open the envelope. The single sheet of white paper held one word.

"Bastard."

***

The next morning Ralph Chandler gathered his courage and went to the cemetery again. A bright red cardinal perched on a limb in a nearby tree and called to his mate. Hearing an answer, the bird flitted into the bushes.

The mound of brown dirt still covered his wife's coffin.

"No such things as ghosts," he told himself. "She's dead as dead can be."

He watched her die. He saw her embalmed body in the casket. He watched the workmen lower the coffin into the ground. The ghost of Janet Chandler was not writing him notes.

But then Chandler's sanity ebbed as Morris Clyburn again pulled up in his small truck. The old man's bladder loosened and he wet himself. Mortified, he watched the mailman stroll toward him with a small box in his hand. Chandler's hands began to sweat and then they shook. The mailman carried Janet's jewelry box.

Without a word the mailman handed Ralph the small box. He got back in his truck and disappeared around the bend, the truck dissolving into nothingness as it turned.

The small box grew so cold in Chandler's hand that he dropped it. Janet's engagement ring and wedding band tumbled out of the box. Chandler screamed out load. Nearby mourners looked his way in curiosity. He squatted on arthritic knees and grasped the rings in his hand.

A squeal erupted from his lips as a hand clawed out of dirt and squeezed his wrist. The hand dripped rotting flesh and white bone gleamed

in the sunlight. Janet's hand pulled him downward and he fell onto the dirt. He tried to pull his arm loose from the skeleton's grip but it pulled harder.

Somehow Chandler gained his knees and tried to stand. The hand yanked on his arm again and he dropped the rings into the dirt. His pounding heart almost burst from his chest.

Janet released his arm and patted around in the dirt looking for her rings. Her fist closed around them and Chandler heard a muffled howl of triumph. The hand receded into the dirt with the middle finger raised in a mock salute.

The other mourners found Chandler a few minutes later laying on the grave weeping in giant sobs and then laughing hysterically. They called 9-1-1.

***

"No, no, no!" Chandler pleaded with the ambulance attendants.

"Please, please, not the hospital!" he begged.

Two EMTs pinned him onto the cot as he thrashed and struggled to get away.

"Relax, sir. We're almost at the hospital."

An orderly met him at the front door.

"Mr. Chandler? Nice to see you again, sir. We'll get you settled in a room before you see the doctor."

The rolling bed rattled down the sterile hall passed offices and the cafeteria.

His wife's office door still bore her name, "Dr. Janet Chandler, Director of Psychiatry."

Double swinging doors swooshed open to the patients' rooms. Chandler's room was stark white. The padded walls, the sheets, the pillow, all white.

The orderly fitted him into a straight jacket and settled him onto the bed.

After an eternity his door opened and Dr. Joseph Maguire entered followed by another doctor hidden by the shadows.

"Ralph, hello. Sorry to see you again in this state. But I'm positive we can help you."

“And I’d like to introduce you to your attending physician. This is an amazing coincidence but your doctor has the same name as your late wife.”

A gaunt skeletal thing stepped out from behind Dr. Maguire. Her white bony hands held a medical chart. The thing wore Dr. Janet Chandler’s wedding and engagement rings on her left ring finger.

“Welcome Mr. Chandler. I’ll be back frequently to work with you.”

As Dr. Janet Chandler pulled the padded door shut she turned back to the old man. Her hazel eyes were nothing but empty sockets. Rotting flesh fell from her bones. The teeth in her lipless mouth opened and she hissed a single word.

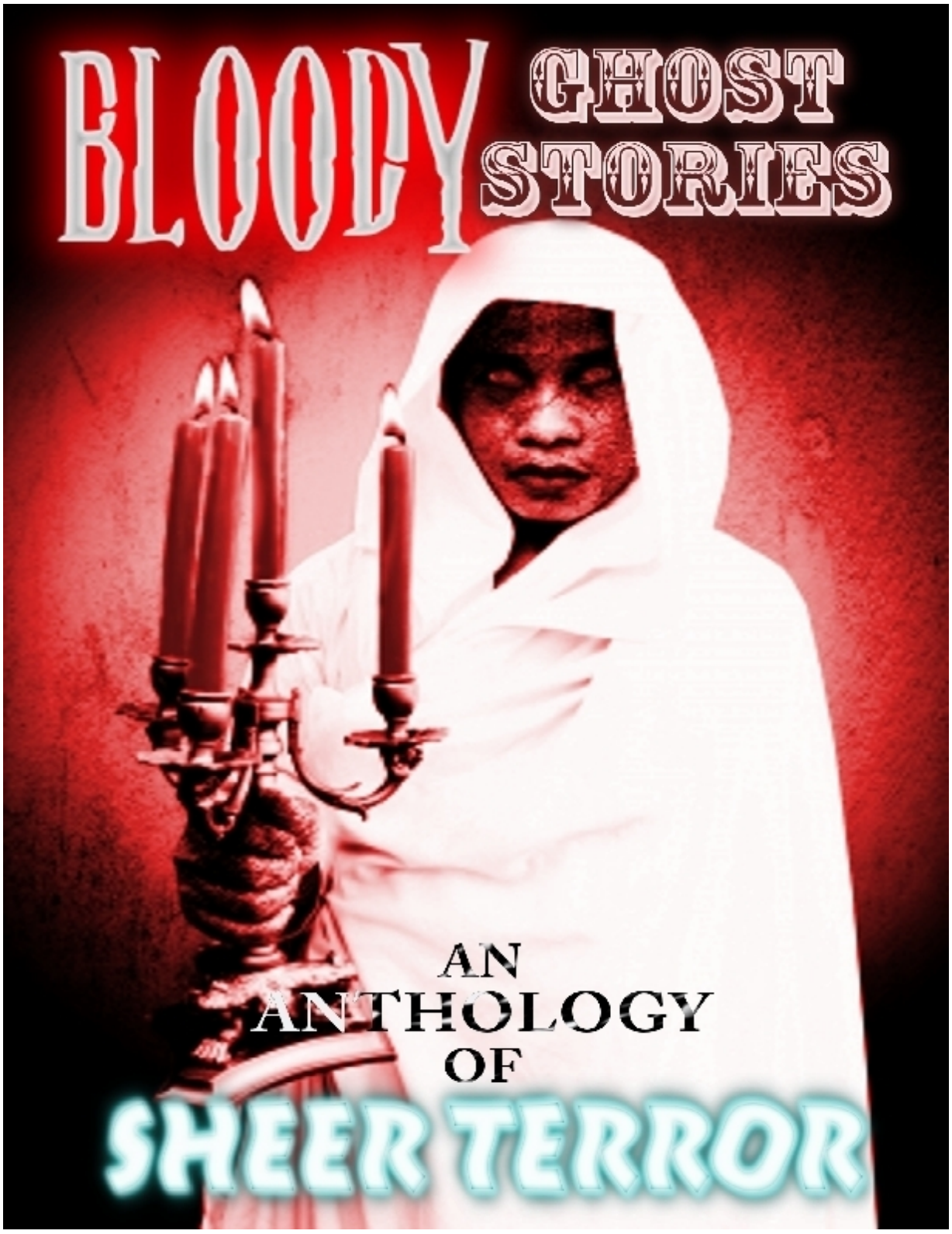
“Bastard.”

Blood erupted from Chandler’s eyes and ears. His red puke splattered the walls, the sheets, and the pillow. He shrieked and thrashed on the bed until his body was awash in his own blood.

The door closed on Ralph Chandler’s future, his happiness, and his sanity.

About the Author:

Tim Tobin holds a degree in mathematics from LaSalle University and is retired from L-3 Communications. *Call Him Bastard* marks his tenth appearance in Static Movement. His work also appears in Cruentus Libri Press, The Speculative Edge, Rainstorm Press, Twisted Dreams, The Rusty Nail, In Parentheses, and the Whortleberry Press as well as various websites and ezines. Mr. Tobin is a member of the South Jersey Writer’s Group and of the Dead Poets Society of Camden County College.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